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November Reflections

Synod 2023: Toward A World Church

       On October 4, 2023, the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi, Pope Francis presided at the opening Mass of the Synod of Bishops meeting in Rome during the month of October. In his homily, the Pope urged people to look at the synod not as “a political gathering” or a “polarized parliament” but as a “convention in the Spirit”, who can create “something new that surpasses our predictions and negativity”. Through “synodal dialogue” the Church can grow in friendship with the Lord so we can see today’s challenges through his eyes and become a church that “does not impose burdens” and is “open to everyone, everyone, everyone”. The Pope went on to say the “welcoming gaze of Jesus” keeps the church from falling into dangerous temptations: being “rigid” and looking backward; being “lukewarm” and surrendering to the fashions of the world; and being “tired” and turned in on itself. Frances concluded his homily by urging us to walk in trust and joy with the Holy Spirit, the protagonist of the synod who continues to guide the Church.

      The Mass was part of a three-year dialogic process that began in October, 2021 when Pope Francis announced a “synod on synodality,” which he called the “path God expects of the Church in the third millennium”.  He saw it as continuing the renewal initiated by  the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), an ongoing journey to renew the inner life of the Church and enhance its mission to the world.  The first part of the long process, known as the “diocesan or national phase”, which lasted from the end of 2021 through the  first half of 2022, was designed to allow the 1.3 billion Catholics resident in some 3,000 dioceses around the world to express their hopes and concerns for the Church. Next came the “continental phase” from October 2022 to July 2023 during which major regions of the world (Europe, North America, Latin America, Asia, Africa, Oceana and the Middle East) held “assemblies of the people of God”, typically four -day events when bishops, priests, religious and lay people representing various bishops’ conferences discussed the results of the first phase. From these discussions, scholars produced a “working document” consisting of questions or areas of concern to be discussed at the October, 2023 meeting in Rome of the 16th assembly of the Synod of Bishops.

     After the opening liturgy, the 364 voting members of the assembly (75% Bishops, 25% priests, religious and lay persons, 15% women) went on a three-day retreat led by British Dominican Timothy Radcliffe who began by recognizing the deep differences in the group, but went on to insist that by “listening to the Lord and each other,” we can be “united in a hope that transcends all disagreements.”

From his vantage point as an assembly theologian, Austin Ivereigh  summarized the synodal process.  The participants began their daily work sessions in language groups of ten at round tables assisted by a facilitator and modern technology that provided swivel cameras and simultaneous translations.  Each person had four minutes to speak about their own experiences of the issue at hand.  After all were heard there was a period of silent reflection which led into the second round in which the participants commented on what struck them in the remarks of their table partners. With the help of the facilitators, the tables then had an open discussion identifying agreements and disagreements and suggesting ways to advance the process by posing questions, making concrete proposals and identifying issues that need further study. Then in a general session, a reporter for each of the 35 tables read a three minute summary of the table discussions. This led into an afternoon of “free interventions” when speakers could express their views on what they heard. Finally, the small groups met again to revise their reports and submit them to the secretariat of the assembly.

Employing “The Conversation in the Spirit” method,  the assembly worked its way through various topic areas in the working document: for example, identifying priorities; dealing with questions such as how the Church could better recognize the baptismal dignity of women; and voting on the final consensus document.

     Commenting on the small group process,  Ivereigh noted some common complaints: too fatiguing, restrictive and secretive. Nevertheless, he insisted the synod did work; the small group approach was transformative; the Conversation in the Spirit method was for the most part “brilliantly successful;” and Synod 2023 produced a “map” to prepare for Synod 2024 that shows Church diversity is compatible with Church unity.

At the end of the Synod, the theologian advisors drafted a “Letter to the People of God,” approved by the assembly summarizing the progress to date and pointing out there is much to be done over the next eleven months. More importantly, they drafted a final 41 page summary report that was voted on  paragraph by paragraph by the 364 Synod participants with every paragraph receiving at least a two-thirds majority.

The paragraph advocating more study on ordaining women deacons was approved 270 to 67, one of the highest negative votes on any specific issue, perhaps because it was seen as a break with tradition. In this regard, Austin Ivereigh suggested  some dedicated Asian women might be opposed because they see ordination as a way of clericalizing and controlling their innovative ministry, a startling notion to Americans advocating for women deacons as one way of challenging an exclusive, male clerical culture.

     The final report said nothing specific about LBGT issues, not even using the word “homosexuality”. It did insist that care for those who feel  alienated from the Church because of their sexuality should be “heard and accompanied”. According to leaked press reports, James Martin, SJ, an advocate for gay rights and a papal invitee to the synod was verbally castigated for expressing his views on LBGT issues by a bishop at his table who then walked out of the hall. For his part, Fr. Martin spoke very positively about the synod experience that formed friendships across boundaries, motivated by a shared love of Christ who knows no boundaries. During the synod, Pope Frances initiated private meetings with both Fr. Martin and Sr. Jeannine Gramick, longtime leader of the New Ways Ministry advocating for LBGT rights. In an interview, Fr. Martin said he was not surprised that the issue of gay rights did not make the final report because of the strong push back it received in the synod discussions, presumably from African bishops who prefer silence on the issue.

On theta victims ongoing issue of clergy sex abuse, the synod summary report called for listening and accompanying  them on the long journey toward reconciliation and justice with special attention to the “structural conditions that abetted such abuse” and with “concrete gestures of penitence.”

     Finally, the report called for “theological clarification” of the meaning of the terms “synodal” and “synodality” while expressing confidence that they are expressions of the “dynamic and living tradition” and a “true act of further reception” of Vatican II and its teachings. Acknowledging the fear of some that the teachings of the Church will be changed, the report expresses confidence in the guidance of the Holy Spirit and warns that opposition to the synod can “conceal a fear of losing power and the privileges that derive from it.” The summary document will now go to the local churches for discussion, revisions and proposals in preparation for the second and final session of the synod on synodality in October, 2024.

Reflecting on the synod from a historical perspective can help us better understand and appreciate its function and significance. Although the word “synodality” may be unfamiliar to many Catholics today, synods have been an important part of Church history from the beginning. In the year 49,  just two decades after the death and resurrection of Jesus, the leaders of the apostolic Church including Peter, James and Paul met in Jerusalem and after much debate made the most momentous decision in the whole history of the Church that Gentiles should be welcomed into the Church without accepting the Mosaic Law, a decision they attributed to the Holy Spirit. (Acts 15: 1-35). This meeting known as the Council of  Jerusalem serves as a prototype of future meetings of bishops who gather to discuss and pray over decisions affecting the Church.

        Many important synods were held in north Africa from the 3rd to 6th century. For example, in 256 St Cyprian of Carthage hosted some thirty bishops along with a good number of non-voting priests, deacons and lay persons to consider the contentious issue of the rebaptism of lapsed Catholics.

     In 1965, during Vatican II, Pope Paul VI established the modern “Synod of Bishops” to promote greater cooperation among the bishops from around the world . The first fifteen  synods gathered bishops to discuss specific topics such as the Church in Africa and Justice in the World, while the current one has synodality itself as the topic and includes non-bishop voting members.

The well-publicized Synod of 2023 provided a glimpse of what the great German theologian Karl Rahner, SJ called the “world-Church”. In a scholarly article, Rahner argued that we should think of the 2nd Vatican Council not so much as the culmination of the theological, liturgical, scriptural and ecumenical movements of the twentieth century, but as the tiny beginning of the Catholic Church becoming, for the first time, aware of itself as a world-Church. Rahner saw this development as the second great change in the history of the Church, superseded in importance only by the opening to the Gentiles in the first century. In another context, he dreamed of a future pope (think Pope Francis) who understands this development and encourages regional churches to develop indigenous forms of Christianity. In the world -Church, each culture will develop its own distinctive expression  of the basic substance of the Christian message. In this situation, there will inevitably be a great deal of pluralism in Canon Law, liturgical rituals and Christian practices.  According to Rahner, the great challenge is to maintain a “unity of faith” in a Church with such great diversity. It is this very challenge that impacted some US catholics paying attention to the 2023 Synod when stark differences emerged between our American church and churches in the global south.

     In the world Church, Rahner noted that national hierarchies will have greater power to determine local approaches and practices. With this in mind,  we  can imagine the German church blessing same sex unions while the African churches would not even consider it. It would also be possible to imagine the American church ordaining women deacons while  Asian churches find creative ways of enhancing the ministry of women.

As the Church prepares for the 2024 Synod and gradually actualizes itself as a fully functioning world-Church, we need more than ever the virtue of Christian hope founded on trust in the Holy Spirit, the protagonist of the Synod, who “kindles diversity and at the same time brings about unity” as Pope Francis wisely teaches.

(Words: 1845)

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