

SYNOD OF BISHOPS

DO NOT BE AFRAID

What is about to happen in Rome? The meeting of the Synod of Bishops due to start next week has prompted diametrically opposed expectations. There are those who are alarmed that this gathering of more than 400 bishops, clergy and laity – the latter two categories are heavily outnumbered – might try to overthrow key aspects of traditional Catholic teaching. It will sanction the church celebration of gay marriages, for instance, or demand the ordination of women. In the opposite camp are those who will measure the success or failure of the synod by precisely the same criteria but in reverse. Both sides are mistaken. Even though the synod about to open next week is only the first of two, and no decisive resolutions will be agreed until after the second one in October next year, the various lobbies treating it as a battle to be won or lost profoundly misunderstand and underestimate what is at stake.

The synodal concept requires listening as well as talking. It requires open, humble and prayerful minds to hear what is being said. There is a fear that decisions will be made by one side outvoting the other. When the General Synod of the Church of England voted to admit women to the priesthood in 1992, the motion was carried by a margin of two votes. The victors cheered. Those outvoted felt marginalised. The wound still festers, more than 30 years later. By contrast, the documents of the Second Vatican Council were approved almost unanimously. Enormous time and effort was put into reaching a consensus. It is only in such circumstances that the true mind of the Church, guided by the Holy Spirit, can be reliably discerned.

This is the ecclesiology behind the synodal process that Pope Francis has initiated. It acknowledges that while the help of the Holy Spirit can be called upon to guide the Magisterium, this guidance is only discerned with the participation of all the People of God, including the laity. Only then can the *sensus fidelium* be fully known. And on occasions, as John Henry Newman argued in his famous essay *On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine*, sometimes the lay voice can be nearest to the truth. Indeed, in connection with the two issues already cited, lay opinion has already influenced the mind of the Church. Regarding female ordination, for instance, it is no longer accepted that, by its current ban, the Church is saying that women have no contribution to make to its governance.

Given that clericalism is one of the underlying flaws in Catholic life, simply allowing women to join the priesthood without addressing that problem might only compound it – but this makes greater female influence in the governance of the Church all the more urgent and necessary. It also suggests that the time has come to separate the role of the sacramental priesthood from the exercise of authority, hitherto regarded as welded together. Aside from the question of whether or not a woman can celebrate Mass, why shouldn't a woman run a parish? They already run Catholic primary and secondary schools.

Similarly, Catholic lay opinion has turned against the designation of homosexuality as “intrinsicly disordered”, not because it seems harsh but because it is a questionable

application of natural law theology. And there are other applications of natural law, such as regarding contraception, that laypeople find it impossible to assent to in good conscience. These are legitimate issues to be aired on the floor of the synod, voices that need to be heard and responded to.

The synod is not just an event taking place in Rome this October and next. Synodality must become a permanent part of the life of the Church. With the synodal process Pope Francis is making the mission-oriented Catholicism envisioned by Vatican II a project of the whole of the people of God – in which he includes not only the lay faithful but all the baptised, all people of faith, all people of good will.

At a time when Christianity in Europe seems so pinched and timorous – and humiliated, after the child sex abuse scandals – he is a Pope from the global South with a completely different starting point, ambition and agenda. It is a breathtakingly grand vision.

Nevertheless, insisting that the lay voice be taken seriously – even acknowledging that the laity are the primary evangelisers of the modern world – draws attention to a deficiency of structures in the Church where such a voice can be transmitted. Vertical structures, which express communion with the bishop and the Pope, are in place; horizontal structures, by which the faithful can express their communion with each other – what “communicate” really means – have been neglected. There is almost an implicit fear of the laity behind this neglect.

In what can be seen as a critique of earlier models of the Synod of Bishops, Pope Francis has said: “There are ecclesial structures which can hamper efforts at evangelisation, yet even good structures are only helpful when there is a life constantly driving, sustaining and assessing them. Without new life and an authentic evangelical spirit, without the Church’s ‘fidelity to her own calling’, any new structure will soon prove ineffective” (*Evangelii Gaudium*). Such structures must be “suitably channelled for the evangelisation of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation. The renewal of structures demanded by pastoral conversion can only be understood in this light: as part of an effort to make them more mission-orientated ...”

It is hard to see how any group or faction in the Church – whether styled as conservative or progressive – could quarrel with such an open and evangelical call to reform. Again a fear of the laity seems to be at the root of resistance to it – a hankering after the days when the job of the lay faithful was simply to “pray, pay and obey” and when “what Father says, goes”.

This is the mentality and culture that explains why the authorities in the Church were so slow to realise the enormity of the child abuse scandal in their midst, and why many bishops and clergy and some influential lay Catholics closed ranks in denial rather than face up to it. The damage will take generations to recover from. A transformation in the Church’s mentality and culture is what is now at stake. One big step in the right direction lies ahead, and the Holy Spirit is there to guide it.