



# St Brigid's Day Lecture: Synodality for Mission

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In October 2021 Pope Francis called for a Synod on Synodality because he felt it was critical.

Critical for our world: Our world is fractured along political, social, and cultural lines. Individualism is rampant. Social media encourages people to live in self-referential silos; different interest groups, not to mention different ethnic groups in western society can live in parallel universes. There is a rising degree of incivility – contempt even, in political discourse; the signs are particularly stark when we look across the Atlantic right now. It could come here. In this fractured landscape, Pope Francis says, surely, we the followers of Jesus can witness to something better.

Critical for our Church: we have our own problems. Clericalism is alive and well. It can be an ill-defined bogeyman but properly understood, according to the Synod as: the use of clerical power to exploit or abuse others and to avoid accountability.

Another challenge for our Church - the passivity and widespread apathy on the part of so many believers.

There is often an absence of joy among people who claim to follow the Risen Christ!

While society increasingly splits into lonely bubbles of like-minded individuals, the Church is called to demonstrate an alternative way of being - one characterised by charity, mutuality, genuine interdependence, and shared responsibility for the common good. Our God is relationship. The Trinity exists as eternal communion - Father, Son, and Spirit in perfect unity. The Church, reflecting God's very nature, must fundamentally be about relationship.



I would like to think that after spending two full months in the Synod Hall I could define synodality in a sentence. From the final document from the synod we can glean a raft of definitions;

Synodality is:

- a *hermeneutic* for understanding ministry, hierarchy and co-responsibility in a Church conceived as the People of God journeying together with Christ towards God's kingdom
- a *path* of spiritual renewal and structural reform that enables the Church to be more participatory
- a *style* of the Church gathering in assembly for mutual listening, dialogue and discernment to reach consensus and make decisions
- a *spirituality* characterised by actively listening to the Word of God, contemplation, asceticism, patience and conversion
- a *way of relating* that is welcoming, listening and communal and a means of healing, reconciliation and rebuilding trust.

For me, synodality is the People of God discerning our shared mission and living it out as Christ's Church for the salvation of the world.

I have a friend, a committed Catholic, who is active in her Parish. She found herself accompanying another Mother whom she meets at the school gate. This other lady's story involved domestic violence, debt and the mental health issues that you can imagine go along with all of that. My friend was supporting her well and I've no doubt that it was a response to the Holy Spirit. But she started asking herself; 'Why am I not inviting this person to come to our Church?'

It is a really good question. She was doing all this good Christian stuff for her new friend but it didn't cross her mind that she should bring her to meet Jesus in the Church. I wonder how many of us are convinced that the best thing we could do for someone who is in trouble is to bring them to our Parish, to our Church?

At the synod we spoke a lot about the parish as a centre of mission. *The formation of missionary disciples begins with and is rooted in Christian Initiation.*

We work really hard at Initiation. In the past two weeks I have confirmed over 300 children who were well prepared by their teachers and parents. Their initiation started at their Baptism and has gone on over the years in their schools. The problem is, as we all know that almost Christian formation ends with Confirmation. We named this honestly at the synod. The challenge in front of us is that The holy People of God require proper formation so that they can witness to the joy of the Gospel.

No one can progress along the path of authentic spirituality alone; we need support, including formation and spiritual accompaniment, both as individuals and as a community.

Formation and accompaniment are key to the vision of the future. They go together.

Formation is not just a question of individuals going to scripture classes or learning some theology. Formation and accompaniment go hand in hand. It is a new way of belonging intellectually and spiritually - a belonging of the heart.

Last summer I heard the English Priest, Fr Stephen Wang, talking about Catholic Youth Ministry and I think what he says captures the vision of a missionary parish;

*“The goal is not to put on a good show or to increase the numbers who turn up to your events. That’s a kind of spiritual vampirism where you seek out young people because you want them to give your community new life. No, the goal is to touch their hearts, to enlighten their minds, to help them to know the love of Jesus Christ and to find their home in the community of the Church. The goal is to save souls. There will be a thousand different ways of doing this. But it’s always the same Spirit working for the same purpose.”*

*(Fr Stephen Wang,  
Into the Deep Conference, June 2024)*



There is a recently established Parish Pastoral Council in this Parish of St Brigid’s. I would love the members to be thinking and praying and discerning about how St Brigid’s parish will become more and more a place where you would invite your friends because you know that they will feel welcome and feeling welcome they will have opportunities to get to know and love Jesus.



Let’s look together at how the final document describes the steps in a discernment.

*a) clearly setting out the object of discernment and disseminating information and the means for adequately understanding it;*

The point of this is that a discernment conversation is not simply shooting the breeze. It has to be about realities and if a decision is to be made it should be based on solid information and research if necessary.

*b) giving sufficient time for prayerful preparation, for listening to the Word of God and for reflection on the question;*

Doing a discernment always has to involve prayer. God is in the middle of the issue that we are concerned about – we start from that conviction, and we turn first of all to the Word of God and let it speak to us.

*c) an inner disposition of freedom regarding one’s own interests, both personal and as a group, and a commitment to the pursuit of the common good;*

This is an essential part of Ignatian discernment. We must recognise that we all have our own biases – our fears and desires can get in the way of doing God’s will. It can be hard for me to accept that my pet project may not actually be what God wants for our Parish. This can be the most challenging part of the whole process – if we can learn to negotiate it honestly and generously it can become the source of great fruit.

*d) listening attentively and respectfully to each person’s voice;*

In a communal discernment we do believe that God will be speaking through the others in the group.

The way we did this at the synod was using the method of Conversation in the Spirit. It involved each person prayerfully preparing their input in response to a set question. Then we would go around the group of 11 participants in turn listening carefully to everything everybody said and allowing time for silence – we weren’t jumping in on one another to make our point. It was a time of intentional speaking and privileged listening.

*e) searching for the widest possible consensus which will emerge when our hearts burn within us (cf. Lk 24:32), without hiding conflicts or searching for the lowest common denominator.*

A discernment works well when the whole variety of opinions is surfaced and then the group seeks honestly to find common ground. This embodies transparency and accountability, which many people feel are often missing. One sign that the conclusion really is of God is that the group experiences consolation.

We should all be seeking the will of God in this way – parish pastoral councils, families, committees. We are the People of God and the Holy Spirit is leading us.



Relationship is a key concept for understanding the synodal nature of the Church. Another big idea that gets some coverage in the final document is the *sensus fidei*.

It says specifically that:

“The anointing by the Holy Spirit received at Baptism enables all believers to possess an instinct for the truth of the Gospel. We refer to this as the *sensus fidei*. This consists in a certain connaturality with divine realities based on the fact that, in the Holy Spirit, the Baptised become sharers in the divine nature”. (22)

This is the ancient understanding that it is the whole Church which does not err in questions of faith and morals and not simply the bishops who are the successors of the apostles. For example, when the Church over the last two centuries taught definitively about the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption of Mary it was articulating a faith that was held by the whole People of God.

We acknowledge that there is a need for the continuous formation of consciences and the maturing of the *sensus fidei*. (83) My colleague at the synod Archbishop Fisher of Sydney says;

“The faith of the baptised must be rooted in Scripture, Tradition and Magisterium, not just personal preferences or the enthusiasms of the age; it is not enough simply to be one of the baptised.” The Church must always be ‘reading the signs of the times’ in order to respond to the challenges confronting its people but it is never true to itself if it becomes conformed to the spirit of the age. The exercise of the *sensus fidei* must not be confused with public opinion.“

The way this synodal process was introduced, I believe, raised unrealistic expectations. Some people thought that this synod would bring revolutionary changes. The well-known contentious issues were the question of women’s ordination and the church’s sexual teaching. They were hotly debated in the first session in 2023 and subsequently they were given their own space in study groups established by Pope Francis.

My own conviction is that revolutionary change is not possible in the Catholic Church. St John Henry Newman spoke of the possibility of development of doctrine. What he meant was that in a new age we might be able to express better the core truth that was held in an earlier formulation. Newman would never have countenanced the idea that the settled teaching of the Church could be set aside. It’s based on the idea that Christ teaches through his Church in every age, and he isn’t going to contradict himself over time.

Newman is often quoted in relation to the development of doctrine but it is important to situate that in the overall context of his world view. As an intellectually precocious teenager he had lost his faith under the influence of modern ideas. He describes his conversion in the following terms;

*“When I was fifteen, a great change of thought took place in me. I fell under the influences of a definite Creed, and received into my intellect impressions of dogma, which, through God’s mercy, have never been effaced or obscured.”*

(St John Henry Newman)



A specific issue that arose involves the teaching authority of bishops’ conferences. There were a number of German bishops present and other supporters of Germany’s Synodal Way and they were quite open about their goals. One proposal would give local bishops’ conferences some power to make doctrinal decisions. When this idea appeared in the working document for the second session, many of the delegates objected, worried it would lead to chaos. Would this mean same-sex marriage could be accepted in Germany but considered gravely sinful in Nigeria? The final document talks about bishops’ conferences being able to express the faith in culturally appropriate ways. What does this mean?

Does it simply mean the Bishops of one country or region can apply unchanging Church teaching with sensitivity to the local culture, or can they actually modify that teaching for different cultures? That would have serious consequences for the unity of the Church’s teaching and practice. In earlier drafts the wording seemed ambiguous. In final document (para 125) it was more clear.







The contribution of women to the life and mission of the Church was acknowledged resolutely in the synod hall.

*“Women make up the majority of churchgoers and are often the first witnesses to the faith in families. They are active in the life of small Christian communities and parishes.*

*They run schools, hospitals and shelters. They lead initiatives for reconciliation and promoting human dignity and social justice. Women contribute to theological research and are present in positions of responsibility in Church institutions, in diocesan curia and the Roman Curia. There are women who hold positions of authority and are leaders of their communities.*

*This Assembly asks for full implementation of all the opportunities already provided for in Canon Law with regard to the role of women, particularly in those places where they remain underutilised. There is no reason or impediment that should prevent women from carrying out leadership roles in the Church: what comes from the Holy Spirit cannot be stopped.”*

That is very strong and true.

It leads us to the question of ordination of women which many people called for. Ahead of the synod Pope Francis was speaking on the programme 60 minutes in America – he was asked about the ordination of women and his response was unambiguous: It is not possible for women to be ordained into Holy Orders. The final document says that the ordination of women to the diaconate is an open question and needs further study. For many people, advocated of women’s ordination, this is a sign of hope. I honestly feel that it raises hopes that will be very difficult to realise. The settled teaching on this has been articulated very clearly by the last 4 Popes for the Church to reverse this I believe is impossible.

Participation was a huge focus. The final document states very clearly that; The lay faithful, both men and women, should be given greater opportunities for participation, also exploring new forms of service and ministry in response to the pastoral needs of our time in a spirit of collaboration. The Funeral Ministry that we have recently introduced in our Diocese is an example of this – lay men and women responding to the pastoral need to accompany families in the time of bereavement. This will certainly develop.



We’ve spoken about the need for good formation and this is where the ministry of the catechist will have enormous value in helping to create Missionary Disciples.

The final document speaks of;

a) the increased participation of laymen and laywomen in Church discernment processes and all phases of decision-making processes (drafting, making and confirming decisions);

There was a great deal of conversation and debate about these ‘decision making processes’. When is a body purely consultative and when and how could and should lay people have more than consultative input into decisions?

There are a couple of questions here that we will be working for the foreseeable future – to what extent is authority linked to ordination? Pope Francis has made a serious attempt to stretch the limits of this question by appointing Sr Simona Brambilla as prefect of the Dicastery for Consecrated Life, the first woman to hold such an office in the curia. How does a church that is fundamentally hierarchical be genuinely participative at the same time?

b) greater access of laymen and laywomen to positions of responsibility in dioceses and ecclesiastical institutions, including seminaries, theological institutes and faculties

We have in Maynooth, the national seminary, lay men and women philosophers, theologians, scripture scholars and their contribution is immense.

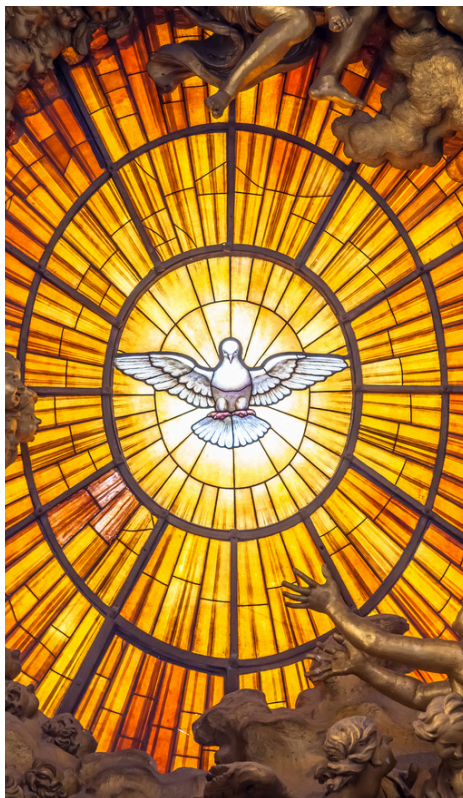
Bishop Robert Barron, while supportive of lay participation in the decision making of the church flagged a concern for us. Were we focusing so enthusiastically on the issue of drawing laypeople into the internal governance of the Church, that the synod tended to overlook the role played by 99 percent of the laity—namely, the sanctification of the world. It is indeed good that both laymen and laywomen are included in the governing structures of the Church, but we should be, above all, concerned with forming the overwhelming majority of the laity who will do their sacred work in their families, workplaces, in the world of politics, journalism and public service.



When Pope Francis called the Synod, he said that he wanted it to be about Communion, Participation and Mission. The conversations that have emerged have tended to be more about communion and participation than about mission. I believe that we need to concentrate on building real, honest, faith-filled communion first and mission will follow.

My dream for our diocese is the one that I directed to the new Parish Pastoral Council here in St Brigid's. I want our parishes to be places where people are open to listening to the Word of God and the Church's Tradition and who go on to learn the art of discerning what God is calling us to be and do in our time and place. God will teach us how to foster faith and hope and love in our parishes and help us to become ministers of his Joy.

There will be a new spring and one of the signs of it will be that we will spontaneously invite our friends and neighbours to come and be involved and find new life as well as rest for their souls in heart of our parish.



## Useful Resources

### Final Documents from the XVI Synod of Bishops

### Information on the Irish Synodal Pathway and Irish Church submission to the Synod on Synodality

[www.synod.ie](http://www.synod.ie)

### Resources on synodality

Provides useful videos and toolkits

<https://www.schoolforsynodality.org.uk>

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful.  
And kindle in them the fire of your love.  
Send forth your Spirit and they shall be created.  
And you will renew the face of the earth.

Lord,  
by the light of the Holy Spirit  
you have taught the hearts of your faithful.  
In the same Spirit  
help us to relish what is right  
and always rejoice in your consolation.  
We ask this through Christ our Lord.  
Amen.

We stand before You, Holy Spirit, as we gather together in Your name.  
With You alone to guide us, make Yourself at home in our hearts;  
Teach us the way we must go and how we are to pursue it.  
We are weak and sinful; do not let us promote disorder.  
Do not let ignorance lead us down the wrong path  
nor partiality influence our actions.  
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.  
All this we ask of You, who are at work in every place and time, in the  
communion of the Father and the Son, forever and ever.  
Amen.