

Women on the Synodal Pathway: A more authentic Church¹

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A few weeks ago I was addressing this theme of synodality in general. All was going fine, I thought, until with great positivity I introduced to the conversation a picture of Sr Natalie Becquart together with a quote from her. Sr Natalie (1969) is a French Catholic, and a religious sister of the Congregation of Xavières. On 24th May 2019, she was appointed – together with four other women and one man - as consultor to the general secretariat of the Synod of Bishops. This is important as this was the first occasion that women were appointed to this role. Sr Natalie saw the appointment as part of Pope Francis's effort "to implement synodality at every level of the Church's life" and thereby to benefit from the important contribution that women can make. More recently, on 6th February 2021, Pope Francis appointed Sr Natalie as an undersecretary of the Synod of Bishops. This means she will be the first woman to have the right to vote in the Catholic Synod of Bishops.

One woman amongst the attendees at the talk asked, "One woman Fáinche, what are they thinking?"

This comment stopped me in my tracks, and rightly so. It caused me to think, and think again. The words of Cardinal Martini, a great scripture scholar and important contributor to reform in the Church, came to mind. Two weeks before his death at the age of 85 (Aug 31st) he gave an interview to Fr George Sporschill, a 'spiritual testament' to be published after his death. He noted 'the Church is tired ... The church is 200 years behind the times. Why doesn't it stir? Are we afraid? Is it fear rather than courage?'

So one woman with a right to vote in the Catholic Synod of Bishops ... the Church really is 200 years behind the times.

Yet Pope Francis, just two months ago on October 9th 2021 invited us, all the baptized, to begin to journey with him along the synodal pathway. His prayer was that

this Synod be a true season of the Spirit! For we need the Spirit, the ever new breath of God, who sets us free from every form of self-absorption, revives what is moribund, loosens shackles and spreads joy. The Holy

¹ Text of paper delivered at St. John the Baptist Church, Clontarf (8/12/2021)

Spirit guides us where God wants us to be, not to where our own ideas and personal tastes would lead us. Father Congar, of blessed memory, once said: ‘There is no need to create *another Church*, but to create a *different Church*’ (*True and False Reform in the Church*). That is the challenge.’²

The task, the challenge is clear: to create a different Church. Sr Natalie Becquart is a sign, a small sign of a possible different Church, and Pope Francis has invited us to all begin the journey, the process, to be pilgrims together along the way, to follow the way of Jesus Christ. This is the way of a synodal spirituality. This is the way to be Church in the twenty-first century. The protagonist for this ecclesial journey is the Holy Spirit.

Pope Francis on Synodality

Before speaking specifically about women and the synod, women and the Church, it is important to have some understanding of Pope Francis’s vision of synodality.

In 2015, two years after being elected as Pope, Francis addressed the ceremony commemorating the 50th anniversary of the institution of the synod of bishops (17 October 2015). His key message was that Vatican II’s and Pope Paul VI’s call for synodality in the Church, for the process of synodality to be renewed within the Church, be revived once again. It seems that Francis wants his legacy to be a synodal church, a Church which lives from a spirituality of synodality.

Three years later, on 2nd March 2018, the Churches International Theological Commission published an interesting document entitled *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*.

Most recently, in October, we have seen the publication of the preparatory documentation for the Synod of Bishops meeting in 2023 – this documentation is to help us become synodal. The teachings, guidelines are ‘at the service of the synodal journey’.

All these documents are available on the internet, and I recommend them. They mark significant steps on the preparation for the 2023 synod. This formal Synod will not be the end but is better understood as an important step on the ongoing journey toward always becoming ever more a synodal People of God, a synodal

² Address of His Holiness Pope Francis for the Opening of the Synod, 9th October, 2021.
<https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2021/october/documents/20211009-apertura-camminosinodale.html> Accessed 7/12/2021

church. Indeed both the Church in Ireland, and in Germany had both begun the process toward a national synod before Francis' call. The German process, Die Synodal Weg has attracted some media attention.

In all this talk about synodality it is important to remember that this is not something completely new. As Congar advised we should not seek 'to create *another Church*, but to create a *different Church*.' Vatican II's wonderful phrase comes to mind – we are to create a different Church in creative fidelity to the past. The International Theological Commission reminds us that:

Synodality appears from the start as the guarantee and incarnation of the Church's fidelity to her apostolic origins and her Catholic calling. It presents itself in a form that is substantially a single entity, but one which gradually unfolds - in the light of what Scripture indicates - in the living development of Tradition. This single entity thus has many forms according to different historical contexts and in dialogue with the variety of cultures and social situations. (*Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* 24)

Synodality has always been the way to be Church. The Church founded on the story of the resurrection, to proclaim the good news of the resurrection, was never a 'fixed' entity. The way of being Church, our understanding of how to be Church, to be faithful to God, is continually unfolding in the world, in the various 'worlds', cultures we live in. Synodality enables this diversity of expressions of the one Church of Jesus Christ.

To be Church is to be synodal. Whenever we cease to be synodal and begin to live in accordance with what might be termed 'a clerical hierarchology' we, one could say, 'deface God' before the world. When all decision-making and decision-taking is done by a few ordained men we, if you like, sin against God. We portray to the world an ever more distorted image of the God that is three in one, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, [Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier; Begetter, Begotten, Spirated]. While we can never properly name God, never portray God as God, we must always aim to portray the most truthful picture of God to the world, and this Pope Francis teaches is via a synodal Church, following the synodal way.

So what is a synodal church?

This small Greek word, on which Francis is putting so much weight, *synod*, is composed of the preposition συν meaning ‘with’ and the noun ὁδός, meaning ‘path’. It refers to the path along which the People of God walk together.

In the Gospel of John Jesus identifies himself as “the way, the truth and the life” (Jn 14,6). It followed then that early Christians were called “followers of the Way”. The great fourth century Syrian teacher, Saint John Chrysostom (died 407) noted in a Commentary written on the Psalms that the Church is a “name standing for ‘walking together’ (σύννοδος)” - “Church and Synod are synonymous”, (*Explicatio* in Ps. 149).

It is all of this which leads Pope Francis to confidently, and with authority, proclaim synodality as a constitutive dimension of the Church. It is what makes Church be Church.

Staying with Sacred Scripture, with the New Testament, the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 15: 1-21) gives an account of what is called the Council of Jerusalem. This is a good early example of the synodal process.

Early Christians were Jewish Christians, and thus all the men had been circumcised. Now that Gentiles were beginning to convert to Christianity the question arose - do the Gentile men need to be circumcised? Paul and Barnabas, in their work of evangelisation, of preaching, encountered much disagreement and debate on this question. They, (Paul, Barnabas) with some others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders.

‘When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. But some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said, “It is necessary for them [Gentiles] to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses.”

The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter. After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, “My brothers you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers. And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us ... [Then we read that] The whole assembly kept silence, and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders

that God had done through them among the Gentiles. [Then Peter continued] “I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God.” (Acts 15:4-10)

This account of the Council of Jerusalem illustrates that from the earliest days of the Christian community decision-making was a communal event, involving debate, discussion, listening, dialogue; decision-taking was by Peter.

A Listening Church

This too is how Pope Francis sees it. The synodal process always acts *cum Petro et sub Petro*, with Peter and under Peter. The Bishop of Rome is the supreme witness to the *fides totius Ecclesiae*, he is the “pastor and teacher of all Christians”. However, if the Bishop of Rome is called to speak as the supreme witness to the *fides totius Ecclesiae*, he must first have listened carefully to the bishops. They in their turn must have listened to the pastors, who must have listened to the other members of the Church, those who share baptism but not orders. This listening process is the way in which the non-ordained People of God share in Christ’s prophetic office (*Lumen Gentium* 12). In this way all the baptized can be involved in decision-making and enabled to influence decision-taking.

This process of listening, foundational to the synodal way rests on an old Roman principle: “*Quod omnes tangit ab omnibus tractari et approbari debet*” - “What touches all must be approved by all”.³

Notably decision-taking resides with the ordained ... but we currently have one woman, who is not ordained, who will be part of the decision-taking process at the next Synod of Bishops. We will return to this.

So, we are on the path, beginning to travel the way to the 2023 Synod of Bishops in Rome, at which to date, one woman will be actively involved in the decision-taking. The title of the synod: *For a Synodal Church: communion, participation, mission*. The synodal process in its Catholic expression is understood as consultative. The decision-taking of the ordained, primarily the Bishop of Rome, rests on the gift of listening to all the baptized.

³ In 1140 Gratian transmitted this Roman principle: “What touches all must be approved by all” (*quod omnes tangit ab omnibus tractari et approbari debet*). A similar formulation, referring exclusively to private matters, is found in the Justinian Code of 531. See also Yves Congar, *Droit ancien et structures ecclésiales* (London, Variorum 1982) (Variorum Collected Studies Series 159) p. 312.

Francis is doing his best to ensure the listening is open, active, truthful. An active listening to all the People of God will enable pastoral decisions “that reflect the will of God as closely as possible will be reached, decisions grounded in the living voice of the People of God. The bishops remain the discerners-in-chief, the Bishop of Rome the one who decides.”⁴

A synodal Church is thus to be understood as ‘a Church which listens, which realizes that listening “is more than simply hearing”. (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 171) It is a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn. The faithful people, the college of bishops, the Bishop of Rome: all listening to each other, and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the “Spirit of truth” (Jn 14:17), in order to know what the Spirit “says to the Churches” (Rev 2:7).’⁵ This listening process is a gift, a gift of the Spirit.

Three players are involved in the synodal process – the bishops, all the other baptized, and the Holy Spirit. The key player is undoubtedly the Holy Spirit. The task is for all to learn to recognize the voice of the Holy Spirit, to be open to listen to it. Austin Ivereigh, who has written much on Francis notes that ‘To enter into synodality is to embrace an alchemy in which the Spirit acts as a *complexio oppositorum*, in which what is good and valid on all sides is preserved in a new vision.’⁶

A New Vision, A Different Church - Women

A new vision, a different Church – this is Pope Francis’ invitation to the Church in the third millennium. It is a call to what might be termed a cultural change. A key task for the synodal process is for voices normally silenced to be listened to, and not dismissed. Paul’s advice to women to keep silent in Church – and scholars are not even convinced this is truly Paul’s advice - has been taken literally for too long by those whom it suits.

The Bishop of Rome, Pope Francis has undoubtedly initiated a cultural change when it comes to women. In an Apostolic Letter entitled *Spiritus Domini*, the Spirit of the Lord Jesus, in response to the signs of the times, following many Assemblies of the Synod of Bishops, and recognizing the needs for evangelization, Francis recognized that

⁴ Austin Ivereigh, “The Spirit in the Assembly. Preparing for the synod on synodality”. Sept 16th 2021

⁵ Address of His Holiness Pope Francis for the Opening of the Synod, 9th October, 2021.

<https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2021/october/documents/20211009-apertura-camminosinodale.html> Accessed 7/12/2021

⁶ Ivereigh, “The Spirit in the Assembly. Preparing for the synod on synodality”. Sept 16th 2021, 4.

a doctrinal development has taken place in recent years which has highlighted how certain ministries instituted by the Church are based on the common condition of being baptized and the royal priesthood received in the Sacrament of Baptism; [they are essentially distinct from the ordained ministry received in the Sacrament of Orders. A consolidated practice in the Latin Church has also confirmed, in fact, that] these lay ministries, since they are based on the Sacrament of Baptism, may be entrusted to all suitable faithful, whether male or female, in accordance with what is already implicitly provided for by Canon 230 § 2.’⁷

Thus canon 230 § 1 of the Code of Canon Law was modified so that: “Lay persons who possess the age and qualifications established by decree of the conference of bishops can be admitted on a stable basis through the prescribed liturgical rite to the ministries of lector and acolyte.”

Henceforth ministries first opened in modern time to lay men in 1972 were opened to women. Was this significant step an outcome of the synodal listening process? A work of the Holy Spirit? A listening Bishop of Rome? Perhaps all three.

Then in May 2021 Pope Francis, following again precedents established by Paul VI flowing from Vatican II, established the lay ministry of Catechist for women and men.⁸ This is a remarkable development for the Church universal. Teaching is officially recognized as a ministry. The need for appropriate theological formation, for education, is recognized. That this ministry is a vocation is clearly established. This definite vocational aspect means the ministry of Catechist ‘(consequently) calls for due discernment on the part of the Bishop. It is in fact a stable form of service rendered to the local Church in accordance with pastoral needs identified by the local Ordinary.’

Three new ministries have been opened to women since Pope Francis’ foundational address on synodality in 2015. This is noteworthy, momentous even – [and the sky hasn’t fallen in].

⁷ https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu_proprio/documents/papa-francesco-motu-proprio-20210110_spiritus-domini.html In the *Motu Proprio Ministeria Quaedam* (17 August 1972) Paul VI had regulated the “lay ministries” of lector and acolyte for conferral on suitable male faithful. Francis saw his teaching as in continuity with ‘venerable tradition.’

⁸ https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu_proprio/documents/papa-francesco-motu-proprio-20210510_antiquum-ministerium.html

Francis has undeniably increased the role and respect toward women in the Church. In an address in January (2021) he noted “Women are givers and mediators of peace and should be fully included in decision-making processes. Because when women can share their gifts, the world finds itself more united, more peaceful. Hence, every step forward for women is a step forward for humanity as a whole.”

Every step forward for women is a step forward for humanity as a whole.

Thus far we can confirm that one woman will be voting at the Synod of Bishops. Only one woman, but an increase in decision-taking for women in the Church of 100%.

Let us listen a little to what this woman, Sr Natalie Becquart, whom I mentioned earlier, has to say on the question of women in the Church, a question she identifies as intimately connected to the question of women in society. There is need, she notes, for a new revolution in the church; the word feminism is not a bad one - there are many feminisms, and some will lead us to a change in our mentality, in our thinking – to the culture change synodality seeks to lead to. Sr Becquart references *Vivit Dominus*, the document from the Synod on Youth, a synod she was intimately involved in:

a Church that is overly fearful and tied to its structures can be invariably critical of efforts to defend the rights of women, and constantly point out the risks and the potential errors of those demands. Instead, a living Church can react by being attentive to the legitimate claims of those women who seek greater justice and equality. A living Church can look back on history and acknowledge a fair share of male authoritarianism, domination, various forms of enslavement, abuse and sexist violence. With this outlook, she [the Church] can support the call to respect women’s rights, and offer convinced support for greater reciprocity between males and females, while not agreeing with everything some feminist groups propose. Along these lines, the Synod sought to renew the Church’s commitment “against all discrimination and violence on sexual grounds”. That is the response of a Church that stays young and lets herself be challenged and spurred on by the sensitivities of young people.⁹

⁹ https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20190325_christus-vivit.html Christus vivit, 42. Accessed 8/12/2021

The Church, if it is to be a living Church, must listen to the signs of the times, to the voices of women young and old, and to the voices of men, and respond in line with the Holy Spirit's urging.

The call to Synod, to synodality, is the call of God to the Church of the third millennium. The question of the role of women is an ecclesial question, a call to conversion for the Church. We are all, she notes, 'dans la même bateau'. If we are all in the same boat, there needs to be a representation of women, as well as of men, at all levels in the Church and in society. Following the thought of Francis she calls for a synodal conversion of the Church, for a change of mentality, for a break from the way of a clerical church, for a transformation of not only priests but of us all. Co-responsibility, inclusivity, involvement, empowerment, vision, accountability ... these are all terms she uses. Along the synodal way we are to think together, to act, to learn how the Church can accommodate a plurality of cultures, accommodate diversity and still move forward in unity.

Models of Governance

An important limitation in all this is that when it comes to roles of governance there are few models of leadership in women in the Church. Role models are needed. It is not enough to simply recall the superb examples in scripture, it is necessary today for the Church to concretely, to actually permit, to really encourage women to be actively involved in the Church at all levels.

Irish Loreto Sister Patricia Murray, currently executive secretary of the women's International Union of Superiors General, (and a consultor of the Pontifical Council for Culture) (2019), in an address entitled "Women of Strength; Yesterday and Today," comments that both the role and function of women within the institutional Church is evolving. In her time in Rome she has witnessed "an increased presence of women in reflection, discernment, and decision-making at various levels." She identifies as one the greatest challenges for women in the Church today that "our voices would be heard and that space is made for participation at every level in the Church." "We must speak our truth and claim our space with dignity and courage."¹⁰

Parrhesia

¹⁰ <https://cruxnow.com/vatican/2021/02/leading-nun-says-decision-making-shouldnt-be-a-matter-of-ordination>

We must speak our truth and claim our space with dignity and courage. There is another Greek word, *parrhesia*, that I would like to finish with. The term *parrhesia* is a transliteration from Greek (παρρησία *parrhesia* - πᾶν "all" and ῥῆσις "utterance, speech") thus literally "to speak everything", "to speak freely", "to speak boldly". It refers to freedom in speech, speaking openly, clearly, frankly without concealment, ambiguity or circumlocution. It implies fearless confidence, courage, assurance. In the Greek New Testament it is used 31 times referring variously to boldness, boldness in speech, confidence (13 times), confidently, openly, openness, plainly, publicly. It appears most in John's Gospel (9), [Mark, 1; John, 9; Acts, 5; 2 Corinthians, 2; Ephesians 2; Philippians 1; Colossians 1; 1 Timothy, 1; Philemon 1; Hebrews, 4, 1 John, 4) In its various translations into English – speaking plainly, publicly, openly – it loses much of its power, I believe.

On March 27, 2020 in the *Statio orbis* Pope Francis stood still before the world, a world in fear of the Covid pandemic. He spoke with authority from an empty St Peter's Square. He was in himself an embodiment of *parrhesia*, arguably a person of Catholic *parrhesia*. His prayer: "Let us ask the Lord for this 'parrhesia,' this apostolic fervor which impels us to move forward, as brothers and sisters, all of us: forward! Forward, bearing the name of Jesus."

And if we truly ask the Lord for this *parrhesia*, for women as well as for men – we all must have the courage to listen. *Parrhesia*, a gift of the Holy Spirit, a gift which invites all to speak with boldness, frankness, courage (Acts 4:13) needs the accompanying gift of courage in listening, listening openly. Listening without having the answer already in mind.

A short reflection by Prof Rowan Williams comes to mind. Commenting on Mary Magdalene going to the disciples with the news: 'I have seen the Lord!' (John 20:18)

She thinks - 'Tell them', he said to me. He didn't say whether they would listen, but I can guess. Why should they after all? When have they ever? So, what's he doing, asking me to tell them? There will be some of them who won't want to hear. They know what's written and they want to be obedient: women don't give evidence; end of story. I can sort of cope with that because it isn't personal, they are not just talking about me. But it seems to belong in a world where things stay the same, where God has settled what God wants to say and left it there for us, carefully wrapped

up. And I worry that that's a world where this morning doesn't happen, just doesn't happen, where bodies stay wrapped up...¹¹

The synodal way is 'un chemin ouvert', an open road we do not know in advance what and where the Holy Spirit may be calling. Our responsibility is to listen, to act, to be involved. As we embark together, women and men, 'Let us ask the Lord for this *parrhesia*,' this apostolic fervour which impels us to move forward, as brothers and sisters, all of us: forward! Forward, bearing the name of Jesus. ... and let us also pray for a *parrhesia* in listening, for a movement forward in creative fidelity to our rich tradition, to create our Church differently. Let us participate in synodality, embracing the gifts of the Holy Spirit in communion.

The Holy Spirit "works by innovating in continuity with the past" and it is the balance of innovation through tradition that Francis has tapped into by reviving the ancient practice of synodality.

Let this Synod be a true season of the Spirit for women as well as for men, for all the People of God.

¹¹ Paraphrased from a dialogue he wrote for Mary Magdalene on Easter morning