

REPORT FROM BISHOP BRIAN MCGEE TO THE BISHOPS' CONFERENCE **REGARDING THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS OCTOBER 2023**

Introduction

It was generally agreed that the First Session of the XVI Ordinary Synod of Bishops was a very positive experience. The theme, of course, was making the Church more synodal. Those who had attended previous Synods agreed that this one was a different and better experience.

Spiritual Focus

That the Holy Spirit must be the principal protagonist was strongly emphasised. Accordingly, we were encouraged to see the Synod as a spiritual experience and not the debating chamber of a Parliament. There were frequent periods of both prayer and silence throughout each day as well as on specific occasions (e.g. the Rosary, Eucharist Adoration, Friday fasting for peace, pilgrimage to the Catacombs).

Early novel elements were the Ecumenical Prayer Vigil and the three-day Retreat, led by Fr Timothy Radcliffe OP and held at the Fraterna Domus in Sacro Fano. The Retreat was warmly welcomed both for its spiritual value and for bringing us together as a group.

The Sessions

There were two sessions each day, lasting three and a half hours each (8.45am-12.30pm & 4-7.30pm). Saturday had only a morning session. The Pope attended roughly one third of the sessions.

The Assembly met in the Paul VI Aula. The seating at the front of the Aula had been removed to accommodate the roughly 450 participants (members, facilitators, theologians, support people). Instead of sitting in rows and in hierarchical order we were assigned to Small Groups and seated at round tables. There were 37 Small Groups which typically consisted of eleven members plus one facilitator. We changed Small Groups five times (for each Module) which enabled wider sharing of ideas. The Groups were organised by language and previously expressed topic preferences. Hence the seating arrangements were synodal in style and popular.

The first Module studied Section A of the *Instrumentum laboris* which examined the characteristics of synodality. The next three Modules were from the Section B of the *Instrumentum laboris* - Communion, Mission and

Participation. Each of these three modules were divided into five subtopics and this is what the participants chose in advance. For example, my topic for Communion was the relationship between love and truth.

Module C worked on the Synthesis Report and advising how best to prepare for and run the Second Assembly in October 2024.

Each Module began with Mass in St Peter's Basilica. The opening session consisted of orientation and then spiritual and theological input. There then followed two sessions of Small Group discussion before three Plenary Sessions. The Plenary Sessions involved both delivering every Small Group's draft report and free interventions. Speeches could last only three minutes. Although this could be repetitive there was a value in recognising convergences albeit fresh insights were (occasionally) heard too. Finally the Small Groups met again to reflect on what they heard from the Plenary before adapting and completing their written submission (2 pages).

The methodology for the Small Groups was Conversation in the Spirit (CiS). Prior personal study and prayer on the topic was expected. Each member spoke for an initial four minutes with no interruptions permitted. There was silence after every three inputs. After everyone had spoken there was a longer pause for silence. In the second round each participant summed up what they had heard from the other members especially focussing on what most struck them, positively or negatively. Again silence. The third round was free interventions. The Secretary and presenter were responsible for the draft spoken report and the final written submission.

The listening and discussions were of a very high quality. There was strong convergence on most topics. Perhaps the two most frequently expressed opinions were recognising the equal dignity of all the baptised and the need for greater formation throughout the Church: for laity, seminarians, religious, deacons, priests and bishops. Other convergences included that the Church become more open, rediscovery of missionary fervour, co-responsibility in mission and the need for greater female participation. Making certain structures compulsory (e.g. Parish/Diocesan Pastoral Councils) to ensure growth of synodality was endorsed but the need for personal and communal conversion to synodality was deemed to be even more crucial. That the presence of the laity, priests, deacons and fraternal (ecumenical) delegates had enriched the Synod was frequently expressed. Finally, the renewed importance

given to listening led many to wonder if a 'ministry of listening' ought to be recognised.

More significant challenges were around the relationship between love and truth, female diaconate and, to a much lesser extent, female priestly ordination. That a quarter of participants with voting rights were not Bishops led to discussions about the future of the Synod of Bishops. Should the Synod be primarily only for bishops? Given that the new members enriched the discussion should a distinct Ecclesiastical Assembly, in addition to the Synod of Bishops, be created? Should the model used for October 23 be further developed? If so, what should the criteria be for voting members to participate? Certainly it was recognised that the Pope has the authority to decide how a Synod is constituted. October 23 was a true Synod of Bishops.

While it was noted that worldwide many clergy - priests and bishops – had been reticent or sometimes even opposed to the synodal process they must not be demonised. Rather we must listen to them and understand their fears to help us all move forward together.

Synthesis Report

The Synthesis Report accurately reflected the Assembly in a balanced way. Every paragraph was approved. The Report is a transitory document. Next year's Report will be more important as it will contain concrete recommendations for the Pope.

That points for consideration and/or proposals were included in the Report, but which previously were considered closed/unwelcome, symbolised the Synod's openness. Of course, recommending further study of a particular topic does not equate with agreeing with its implementation.

Overall Impressions

As already stated the consistent view was positive. Many bishops considered that the Synod was a genuine collegial experience. The atmosphere was very friendly.

The organisation of the Synod was impressive. The technology was excellent.

However, the Synod was intense. At times it was a challenge to listen well, especially when both sessions on a single day were purely listening to reports and free speeches. Some thought that the Synod was too long and should be

shortened. Certainly, it was a common view that there needed to be more rest periods.

The increased use of emails meant that bishops were distracted by their other duties, which was an extra burden.

Personal Reflection

On a personal level, once I found my feet, I actually enjoyed the Synod! I did not consider that the new format restricted participation. On the contrary I made four written submissions and two spoken interventions to the Plenary. I was also fully involved in the Small Group final submissions. I believe that the Church in Scotland and the Conference had its voice heard. I was able to express my own opinion in line with my conscience.

It is important to record that when the Synod finished I felt a deep peace. I believe that the Spirit was at work, not least in the broadening of minds and hearts, including how we treated each other. The prevalence of openness and discernment must continue. Although the bigger decisions will be made next October there was nothing resembling the divisions and polarisation many predicted. I think that Pope Francis' trust in the Holy Spirit is genuinely deep and his example an invitation for us all.

Thoughts for Consideration in Preparation for October 2024

- 1 The next eleven months is a time of preparation for the Second Session. Simple materials for parishes and dioceses were strongly requested. It was also asked that more theological input be available from the beginning.
- 2 We are under the impression that the same representatives are expected to participate next October.
- 3 The Secretariat presumes that Conferences have already discerned the material gathered from the local Church.
- 4 It would be beneficial to identify and strongly lobby for a second Scottish participant. Most countries had more than one person present.
- 5 I strongly encourage the use of a methodology such as CiS when BCOS discerns and for its implementation in dioceses, parishes and other Church groups.

+Brian McGee
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