Synod on Synodality

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At first sight the recent Vatican announcement that a forthcoming synod would be delayed was non-news. All synods are considered boring, and a synod on synodality sounds entirely self-referential. Yet the announcement was significant.

The synod will take up much time and energy of Catholics at the local, diocesan, national and international level for almost three years, involving local congregations in considerations, dioceses in collating these results and sharing them with other dioceses, bishops in participating in the conversations, reviewing and reporting jointly to the Roman office to draw up the agenda for the synod.

Given the human investment required by synod it is worthwhile to reflect on the recent history of synods and why Pope Francis places such importance on them.

As in so many of his actions, his endorsement of synods addresses challenges facing civil societies, too. This may be the subject of a later article.

In the Western Catholic world synods came out of the Second Vatican Council. In contrast to previous Councils Vatican II focused less on Church teaching than on pastoral renewal, freeing and energising Catholics to live out the gospel in their world.

It paid particular attention to the relationship of bishops to the Pope, seeing them as a college with the Bishop of Rome as its head. Together they were responsible for the teaching and living of faith in the Church.

The council also emphasised the active responsibility of lay Catholics who were equal members of the Church with priests and bishops though with different responsibilities.

Paul VI introduced the synod to express the unity between pope and bishops. The bishops who gathered with him would offer support, advice and symbolise their unity and share in international responsibility for the Church.

Under his successors John Paul II and Benedict XVI who were much preoccupied with unity of faith in the face of dissent, the Pope and his administration tightly controlled the agenda, process and the outcomes of the synod.

While calling for a vibrant church the two popes emphasised the distinctive dignity and descending teaching authority of pope, bishops and priests.

Upon his election Pope Francis has set out to encourage freedom and initiative among Catholics. In his own conduct he paid less attention to issues of authority and doctrine than to outreach to people at the margins of the church and beyond it.

His gift for such symbolic actions as mixing freely with people, holding off the cuff press conferences, and visiting prisons and refugee camps, were as important as his words. He has made synods a crowning symbol of his vision.

He has encouraged participants to speak their mind, to differ on issues, to consult their people, and to see themselves as shaping the understanding of faith.

They model the proper shape of relationships within the church as a whole, which Pope Francis has described as synodality.

Synodality is above all an attitude of mind and heart that encapsulates Catholic tradition.

At its heart is the conviction that the spirit is given to each member of the Church, so that each has the gift and responsibility to contribute to the lived understanding of faith and to share the gospel.

The bishops with the Pope have a distinctive responsibility for teaching. But because lay people move at the edges of faith where the Gospel is shared, their insights are central in commending Christian faith. The centre of the Church is relocated at its periphery. This view of relationships in the Church is based in faith, and underlies the understanding of synodality as reciprocal process conversation in which the chief task of bishops, including the Pope, and of people is to listen for the promptings of the holy spirit.

In their conversation all are variously teachers and learners.

Pope Francis places great weight on discernment.

The conversational process is also one of conversion in which the participants move from a partial and often partisan vision of the gospel and what it entails for the Church to a deeper, fuller and more radical view.

People who might come as spear bearers for particular proposals come to recognise the value in other points of view. This conversion requires inner freedom.

Because all conversations will be partial and will reflect the prejudices as well as the mature reflection of participants, Pope Francis places great weight on discernment. He sees this as the central contribution of bishops and pope.

They are to listen carefully to the conversations of people and bishops respectively and to weigh their proposals for the spirit in which they are made and for their fit with the gospel. This judgment is not made simply by weighing arguments but by spiritual criteria. Pope Francis, for example, has said that he did not followed up some decisions that won majority support at recent synods because he thought the conversation polarised or not sufficiently mature.

Pope Francis' emphasis on synodality has come under threat from two opposing directions.

One insists on clear lines of separation with respect to dignity and authority between pope and bishops, bishops and priests, and priests and laity.

It also insists on lines of separation between church and world, and between Catholic teaching and personal experience. It consequently sees conversation about faith as top down and segmented, not as a continuous flow.

Pope Francis has criticised this vision of the church as clericalism. It makes for a self-preoccupied Church and prevents the flow between shared reflection, consultation and discernment that give energy to the spreading of the gospel.

The Pope's understanding of synodality is also threatened by an approach that applauds him for freeing conversation and opening it to more participants, but judges the process by criteria drawn from contemporary democratic parliamentary processes.

In governance of the church the participants should represent constituencies, press the positions they have taken in caucus, and take votes in which majority decisions would be binding. In Pope Francis' understanding of synodality this view would fail to recognise the canopy of guidance by the spirit in which tradition and discernment have a central part.

Pope Francis would also argue that each of these rival approaches to governance have their counterparts in the contemporary world and each has manifestly run into dead ends that synodality might break through.

The force of this reply, however, might hang on the energies that the synod, together with such similar enterprises as the Australian Plenary Council, release. Andrew Hamilton is consulting editor of Eureka Street, and writer at Jesuit Social Services.

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