

Towards a Synodal Irish Church
Address of Cardinal Mario Grech to the Bishops of Ireland
3 February 2021

Dear brothers,

It is a privilege for us, Sr. Nathalie Becquart and me, to participate in this meeting. Indeed, from the recent contacts I had with some of you I got the feeling that like Pope Francis you are “dreaming a mission option” – you are gearing up to take on a missionary attitude and help the Church in Ireland to go out and reach the fringes of humanity! Some may get startled when they learn that the bishops in Ireland are in a missionary mood because traditionally your nation was one of the world’s most deeply and most stable Catholic countries. But as the Holy Father acknowledges, “Christendom no longer exists”. He explains that “people who have not yet received the Gospel message do not live only in non-Western continents; they live everywhere, particularly in vast urban concentrations that call for a specific pastoral outreach. In big cities, we need other “maps”, other paradigms, which can help us reposition our ways of thinking and our attitudes. We need a change in our pastoral mindset, which does not mean moving towards a relativistic pastoral care. We are no longer living in a Christian world, because faith – especially in Europe, but also in a large part of the West – is no longer an evident presupposition of social life; indeed, faith is often rejected, derided, marginalised and ridiculed”^[1]. It is then obvious that what is needed is a new evangelisation or a re-evangelisation.

During last week’s meeting, Bishop Paul Dempsey rightly inquired how could the Church’s mission in Ireland thrive, especially considering that the Church’s reputation has been shattered by scandals, and that the majority of interlocutors, although baptised, fall outside the Catholic mainstream model – divorced remarried, non-practicing Catholics etc. But this is the Church: a wounded Church! “Only the recognition of being a wounded church, a wounded order, a wounded soul or heart leads us to knock on the door of mercy in the wounds of Christ”^[2]. The church is a field hospital after battle. This stunning image of a field hospital Church calls for a radical change in our ecclesial life – it invites the Church to go outside of its comfort zones towards today’s battlefield. In the words of the Holy Father “the evils of our world – and those of the Church – must not be excuses for diminishing our commitment and our fervour. Let us look upon them as challenges which can help us to grow. With the eyes of faith, we can see the light which the Holy Spirit always radiates in the midst of darkness, never

forgetting that “where sin increased, grace has abounded all the more” (Rom 5:20). Our faith is challenged to discern how wine can come from water and how wheat can grow in the midst of weeds” (EG 84).

In the synodal way lies one of the answers to the question I have been asking. If the church wants to become a missionary church, then it has to be a synodal Church, for synodality is not just a methodological choice, but the mode of being of a church which wants to go out in mission. Indeed, synodality is not only a *methodos* but an *odos*, not only a method but a way towards a re-thinking of the Church’s role in contemporary society. Indeed, synodality is at the way towards a Church which is in a permanent state of a mission. This is clearly articulated by the International Theological Commission in its document, *Synodality in the life and mission of the Church*. “Making a synodal Church a reality is an indispensable precondition for a new missionary energy that will involve the entire People of God” (9). The document emphasises that “Synodality is lived out in the Church in the service of mission. *Ecclesia peregrinans natura sua missionaria est*; she exists in order to evangelise. The whole People of God is an agent of the proclamation of the Gospel. Every baptised person is called to be a protagonist of mission since we are all missionary disciples. The Church is called, in synodal synergy, to activate the ministries and charisms present in her life and to listen to the voice of the Spirit, in order to discern the ways of evangelisation” (53). Synodality is the particular style that qualifies the life and mission of the Church, expressing her nature as the People of God journeying together and gathering in assembly, summoned by the Lord Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit to proclaim the Gospel. Synodality ought to be expressed in the Church’s ordinary way of living and working (70 a). Chapter three of the Final document of the Synod on youth elaborates the theme of “missionary synodality” and presents synodality as the key for evangelisation. The Synod Fathers clearly state that “Synodality is the method by which the Church can address ancient and new challenges, gathering and bringing into dialogue the gifts of all her members, starting with the young” (*Christus Vivit*, 144).

As a matter of fact, the goal of a synodal process is to proclaim the Gospel in a given context to meet the particular challenges of the people living in that place. Thus, it is fundamental for the synodal Church to scrutinise the signs of the times. “Before taking up some basic questions related to the work of evangelisation, it may be helpful to mention briefly the context in which we all have to live and work” (EG 50). A synodal Church is a community in process of discerning the *sitz im leben* of that particular society. “Every Christian and every community must discern the path that the Lord points out, but all of us are asked to obey his call to go forth

from our own comfort zone in order to reach the (existential) peripheries in need of the light of the Gospel" (EG 20). An evangelical discernment should also take into consideration our own institution and pastoral approaches. As Rafael Luciani points out, the sociocultural, economic, and ecclesial domains "are undergoing a systemic crisis that does not simply have to do with whether their organisation and administrative functioning is valid, but with the collapse of the paradigms of society and religion on which they are based. Specifically, in the West, there is a structural crisis in the way in which Christianity is being transmitted, a crisis that often goes unrecognised even by the ecclesiastical institution"^[3].

In order to stress the importance of a discernment realised in a synodal form, Pope Francis notes that "the important thing is to not walk alone, but to rely on each other as brothers and sisters, and especially under the leadership of the bishops, in a wise and realistic pastoral discernment" (EG 33). To make this missionary impulse ever more focused, generous and fruitful, the Pope encourages each particular Church to undertake a resolute process of discernment, purification and reform (EG 30).

In his *Apostolic Constitution* on the Synod of Bishops, *Episcopalis Communio*, Pope Francis affirms that "the Synod of Bishops must increasingly become a privileged instrument for listening to the People of God. For the Synod Fathers we ask the Holy Spirit first of all for the gift of listening: to listen to God, that with him we may hear the cry of the people; to listen to the people until breathing in the desire to which God calls us" (6). In the same Constitution the Pope reiterates that the *Christifideles* are actors of discernment and the voice of the Spirit also reaches the Church through their voice: "Although it is essentially an episcopal body, the Synod does not exist separately from the rest of the faithful. On the contrary, it is *a suitable instrument to give voice to the entire People of God*, specifically via the Bishops, established by God as "authentic guardians, interpreters and witnesses of the faith of the whole Church". A special mention is made about the consultation of the laity both individually and in associations (cfr. No. 7).

Now, if this process of wide participation is fundamental for the Synod of Bishops, *a fortiori* it is an indispensable element for other synodal processes which go beyond the strict synodal structure. But an ecclesiological conversion is urgently needed. As the Holy Father states: "The Church, as the agent of evangelisation, is more than an organic and hierarchical institution; she is first and foremost a people advancing on its pilgrim way towards God. She is certainly a mystery rooted in the Trinity, yet she exists concretely in history as a people of pilgrims and evangelisers, transcending any institutional expression, however necessary" (EG111).

Unfortunately, clericalism still continues to underestimate the laity and their contribution in the Church.

The presence of the people of God makes possible a fruitful circularity between bishops and the community. An ecclesiology of the people of God empowers the Church to see itself and the signs of the times from the perspective of the people who in their everyday life encounter God working in human history. As the Holy Father explains “in all the baptised, from first to last, the sanctifying power of the Spirit is at work, impelling us to evangelisation. The people of God is holy thanks to this anointing, which makes it infallible *in credendo*. This means that it does not err in faith, even though it may not find words to explain that faith. The Spirit guides it in truth and leads it to salvation. As part of his mysterious love for humanity, God furnishes the totality of the faithful with an instinct of faith – *sensus fidei* – which helps them to discern what is truly of God. The presence of the Spirit gives Christians a certain connaturality with divine realities, and a wisdom which enables them to grasp those realities intuitively, even when they lack the resources to give them precise expression” (EG 119).

With Pope Francis, primacy and collegiality are relocated within the broader framework of synodality. And surprisingly, experience confirms that within a synodal context both primacy and collegiality stand out in their true colours. In fact, synodality not only involves the participation of all the people of God but it also needs the ministry of the Pope and the bishops, though it calls for a repositioning or a change of style, that is to say, a new way of exercising our leadership.

Pope Francis has fostered the role of the Synods and inaugurated a new style of synods marked by a real freedom of speech. He is constantly inviting the synod fathers to speak with *parrhesía* and *hypomoné*. But he has above all marked and transformed the synod by his own style of presence. During the celebration of the synod, Pope Francis has embodied a way of being a pastor, mingling among his flock, a disciple and a teacher, who manifests availability, closeness, tenderness, confidence, mutuality. His leadership in the service of collegiality and synodality promotes co-responsibility and participation. The way he exercises authority empowers others to be free. His style of authority is described in the Final Document of the Synod on youth as “a generative force to activate and liberate the freedom”^[4]. By his discrete and unassuming style of presence and his interaction with other during the synod, Pope Francis tacitly communicates the style of primacy which he has called for in his key speech on synodality in 2015^[5]. He has provided a lively and inspiring model of the image of the “inverted pyramid” of the hierarchical authority. “In this Church, as in an inverted pyramid, the top is

located beneath the base. Consequently, those who exercise authority are called “ministers”, because, in the original meaning of the word, they are the least of all ...the only authority is the authority of service, the only power is the power of the cross”^[6]. As Amanda C. Osheim rightly observes: “conceiving of hierarchical authority as an inverted pyramid reverses an older pyramidal conception of the church, a trickle-down ecclesial economy in which the Holy Spirit was given first to the pope and bishops, then to clergy and religious, and finally to the faithful ... This pyramid effectively divided the Church into the teaching Church (*ecclesia docens*) and the learning Church (*ecclesia discens*). By inverting the pyramid, Francis’s analogy recasts authority as being dependent upon reception – listening to and learning from others – within the church”^[7]. In a social milieu where the credibility of the hierarchical authority is being continuously undermined and questioned, a synodal way animated by this new style of shared leadership can help the Church to regain its ability “to speak with authority”.

To be implemented at all levels of the Church, synodality needs “leaders” capable of leading and accompanying synodal processes. Synodality cannot be fostered and implemented without the service of those who exercise authority. But this requires this new style of leadership inspired by Pope Francis’s primacy of “listening”, which can be characterised as collaborative leadership; no longer vertical and clerical but more horizontal and cooperative. A servant leadership that is a way of exercising authority conceived as a service of freedom. It is a certain way of leading by placing oneself in the midst of others, to be with them in a co-responsibility that seeks the empowerment and participation of all. Bishops and pastors still have and must have an important role in assuming the responsibility to guide and maintain the objective of synodality which is to build a people, a fraternal and missionary community at the service of the common good of society. Thus, we, as bishops, are called to continue a path of conversion – like all the faithful in a synodal church – to lead our flock by example as they are first impacted by our style of presence and listening, our closeness and openness to their questions and realities, our coherence and authenticity.

It is more than understandable that as you are setting the Church in Ireland on this synodal course, questions continue to abound as to whether you are making the right decision. But keep in mind the assurance given to us by the Holy Father: “it is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the Church of the third millennium”^[8]. A synodal process promises an ecclesial springtime – a rebirth of an authentic Church. In the words of Herve Legrand synods are not only means and organisms, they are also moments of the passage of Jesus and the manifestation of the *koinonia*^[9]. The moment we embark on a synodal process, we

will open the way for Jesus to visit us. It is a *Kairos*. The fact that the people of God (and here I am referring to *all* the baptised, bishops and clergy included) are still not spiritually and theologically equipped to engage in a synodal process should not dishearten you. Antoine de Saint-Exupery says that “if you want to build a ship, don’t drum up people to collect wood and don’t assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea”. In our case, if we want a synodal Church, let us teach our people to long for the beauty and blessing of the *fidelium communio*.

On behalf of our dicastery and in my personal capacity as General Secretary I would like to forcefully reiterate our earnest availability to help and accompany you in this timely synodal experience. If in your esteemed judgement you surmise that at any stage of this journey my humble presence as Secretary-General of the Synod of Bishops will offer you a beam of comfort, I will do every effort to comply. I am confident that this rapport between our office and the local, national or regional Churches will enhance the relationship between Peter and the bishops together with the ecclesial communities entrusted to their pastoral care – in other words our joined efforts will surely contribute to consolidate a synodal Church.

Cardinal Mario Grech

General Secretary of the Synod of Bishops

[1] Pope Francis, Christmas greetings to the Roman Curia, 21 st December, 2019

[2] Pope Francis, General Audience 07th February 2018.

[3] Pope Francis and the Theology of the people, xvii

[4] Final Document of the Synod of Youth §71

[5] Pope Francis, *Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops*, October 17, 2015

[6] Ibid.

[7] Stepping towards a Synodal Church, in *Theological Studies* 2019, 371

[8] Francis, [Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops](#), October 17, 2015

[9] “Conseils et synodes ne sont pas seulement des moyens et des organes, ce sont aussi des moments de passage de l’Esprit de Jésus et des manifestations de la *koinônia*. Rappelons que toute la tradition parle de célébrer les conciles: par sa dimension liturgique inaliénable un synode échappe à sa dimension de moyen, pour permettre une communion intense à l’Esprit de Jésus». H.-M. Legrand, *Synodes et conseils de l’après-Concile. Quelques enjeux ecclésiologiques*, in *Nouvelle revue théologique* 98 (1976) 193-216, 216