



# The Spirit in the Assembly

## Part II

*The object of the next two years is not a one-off process but a permanent conversion.*

By Austen Ivereigh

The object of the next two years [of the synodal process] is not a one-off process but a permanent conversion, one that involves the transformation and extension *versus populum* of the existing synod institution revived by the Second Vatican Council. As the Vademecum released last week by the synod secretariat puts it: “While the Synod of Bishops has taken place up until now as gathering

of bishops with and under the authority of the Pope, the Church increasingly realizes that synodality is the path for the entire People of God.” That means making pastoral decisions “that reflect the will of God as closely as possible, grounding them in the living voice of the People of God.” This is not, of course, to divinize the popular will, as the French Revolution claimed to do; the bishops remain the discerners-in-chief, the pope the one who decides. But there is now a genuine recognition that the discovery of the divine will—uncovering the presence of the Spirit of God and the bad spirit that seeks to thwart it—has to involve the whole body of the faithful, not just the bishops. Thus, “the purpose of this synod”—and indeed, the point of a synodal Church—“is to listen, as the entire People of God, to what the Holy Spirit is saying to the Church.” It is to make the People of God actors in the process of discernment, rather than passive onlookers.

Unsurprisingly, most Catholics have yet to grasp this challenge. A Church accustomed to a command-and-control model does not adapt easily to synodality, which may be “an essential dimension of the Church,” as Francis put it in his groundbreaking October 2015 speech, but is so far more like an unexercised muscle. To exercise it again suddenly is no small task; it will be effortful, painful, and initially it may seem hopeless. But it is what God asks of the Church in the third millennium, said Francis in the same 2015 speech. It was a conclusion he did not reach lightly, the fruit of a deep discernment over decades.

While the Vademecum offers a general account of the meaning of synodality and lists “good and fruitful practices” to enable it, the other document released last week, the Preparatory Document (PD), prepares the ground for the initial, diocesan phase of the process. Both documents are clear that what is at stake is *culture change*.

A synod is not called to defend or to change anything; it is called to enable an assembly that discerns what the Holy Spirit asks of the Church at this time in relation to the mission for which it exists: to evangelize. A synod is not a program, in other words, but a process; or rather, the program *is* the process, and never more than in *this* process, which is precisely about how the Church can become more synodal. Conservative and progressives can both struggle with this concept, because it is not tied firmly to any particular agenda. If a synod does not double down on tradition in the face of new threats, say the conservatives, or if it does not lead to long overdue reforms that advance equality, say the progressives, then the whole synod process is not to be taken seriously. For then it is either useless or dangerous.

Yet a meeting called to agree on a foreordained program is not a synod, whatever it calls itself. Synods are all about being attentive to whatever the Spirit is trying to say to the Church, not what people have decided ahead of time that the Spirit should be saying. A synod invites us to scrutinize the signs of the times by reading the movement of spirits in the *sensus fidelium*, in the body

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of the People of God gathered by the Church's leaders. It is an ecclesial process of discernment of spirits, with a missionary objective—not just *for* the people but *with* the people, under the guidance of the bishops.

# SYNOD

## Coming together

Many people – even many practicing Catholics – may find the name “Synod on Synodality” and its purpose puzzling. What is a synod in the first place?

The word derives from an ancient Greek term that means “coming together” or “traveling together.” Ancient Christians developed a custom of local leaders coming together to pray and make decisions about matters affecting all the Christian communities in a region. They gathered in the faith that their prayers and discussions would reveal God's will and the way to achieve it.

These gatherings came to be called “synods” and began a tradition of regional synods for bishops, as well as larger ones called “ecumenical councils.” In principle, these were for all bishops around the world to discuss issues that were consequential for the whole church.

Over time, as the power of the papacy grew, ecumenical councils continued to be called, but regional synods diminished in importance. After the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century, such gatherings of Catholic bishops happened infrequently, and only with express permission of the Pope. Meanwhile, even ecumenical councils became rare – only two were held in 400 years.

The most recent one, the Second Vatican Council or “Vatican II,” met from 1962 to 1965 and launched important changes in church law and structure.

One of Vatican II's goals was to revitalize the importance of bishops as heads of their local churches and emphasize their cooperation with one another. As a “college” under the leadership of the pope, the bishops are mutually responsible for the governance of the whole church.

To assist this revitalization, Pope Paul VI created a permanent structure for a Synod of Bishops, with a

secretariat in Rome and a General Assembly gathered regularly by the pope. Since 1967, the popes have brought this assembly together 18 times: 15 “Ordinary Assemblies” and three “Extraordinary,” in addition to a number of “Special Assemblies” involving particular regions of the world.

## Preparing for 2023

The current “Synod on Synodality” is the culmination of all this effort to bring a greater degree of openness, collaboration and mutual listening to the church. Unlike previous synods, this one officially begins in dioceses all over the world, with opportunities for mutual consultation at every level and among many different church organizations.

When the General Assembly meets in 2023, its task will be to prayerfully consider how to move forward as “a more synodal Church in the long-term” – a church that “journeys together.”

### THOUGHT FOR A DAY

Through the call of Jesus people become individuals. They are compelled to decide, and that decision can only be made by themselves. It is no choice of their own that makes them individuals: it is Christ who makes them individuals by calling them. Every person is called separately, and must follow alone.

*-Dietrich Bonhoeffer*

### IN MEMORIAM

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24 October, 9.30: Emer Leonard

11am, Carmel Dunne  
5pm, Annette & Karen Dwyer  
Recent deceased

Jim Dufficy, Anniversary

### Masses and Confession

**Sundays:** Vigil, 6pm (Saturday), 9.30am, 11am, 5pm

Croatian Community Mass 6.30pm

French-speaking community mass 2nd and 4th Sundays of the month at 12.30

Daily masses 10am only for the moment

**-Rosary** daily after 10am mass

**Adoration Blessed Sacrament, Weds 10.30-12.40**

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