

From the wisdom of our former Superiors General

The 36th General Chapter, a true school of synodality - Reflections on the Final Message

- This reflection is a reading by Father Anthony McSweeney, sss, Superior General from 1981 to 1993, of the message of the last General Chapter. It is a penetrating reading, enlightened by a historical understanding of the concept of synodality and supported by the profound meaning it has today for the Church and for us.

Thank you, Fr Philip Benzy, for inviting us, your predecessors, to share our reflections on the message of our General Chapter. For me, it was *synodality* that most engaged my attention.

Synodality or walking together on the journey, represents, I believe, a second great stage in the process of renewing the life of the Church that began with Vatican II, which brought us a biblically enriched vision of the Church as God's people and a long-delayed reform of its liturgy aimed at making it more accessible to believers in the languages and cultures of our day.

With the 2024 Bishops Synod on Synodality we have all seen something radically new in the photos of bishops, cardinals and the Pope himself, seated at round tables together with lay women and men. Not only are lay people now present and engaged; for the first time they are voting members! Non-ordained persons have likewise been assigned roles of facilitating, advising, and consulting.

Pope Francis had already begun this consultative process in preparing his 2015 encyclical *Amoris Laetitia* on marriage and family, commencing with a world-wide consultation of the experience of married people.

Then came the 2018 Synod of Bishops convoked to “accompany young people on their way of life towards maturity so that, through a process of discernment, they can discover their life project and realize it with joy, opening the encounter with God and with men, and actively participating in the building up of the Church and society”.

Here, the bishops drew on feedback from 661 participants in parish listening sessions around the world, as well as young adults’ groups and university campuses together with some 1,000 online responses from young people.

In my own country, the 2018-9 Australian Plenary Council heard the views of some 220,000 people.

Now, at the conclusion of the 2024 Synod on “synodality”, Pope Francis took a further, and controverted, step, since endorsed by recently elected Pope Leo. Rather than concluding it in the customary way with the publication of a document, he set in motion instead a world-wide program of on-going reflection and exchange intended to engage the entire church at every level. In Cardinal Mario Grech’s words, he “‘transformed’ the Synod from an event into a process.”¹

It will indeed be for us all a journey of “walking together” (*synodoi*) as a more participatory and missionary church, whose leaders consult the faithful, listen respectfully to their experiences, and discern together with them God’s will, with a view to developing pastoral policies relevant to actual cultural situations². It will be a learning experience for us all, an exercise in communion, participation, and mission within the whole body of the Church.

¹ “Cardinal Grech: A new path to help the Church walk in a synodal style.” *Vatican News*, 15 March 2025.

² If we had been a synodal church, how could the abuse crisis have developed and been covered up by church leaders for so long in so many countries of the world?

The process is to conclude in 2028 with a post-synodal Ecclesial Assembly charged with laying out a path for the years to come.

To return now to our chapter, its message has rightly highlighted the notion of the Cenacle, the upper room evoking all that Jesus' farewell meal meant, so important for Eymard in his later years.

It is vitally important for us to remember that it was not just about gathering to celebrate a special meal. It had a life-context. When Jesus ate his final meal with his disciples they had been his companions for three years accompanying him along the roads of Palestine, observing his behaviour and learning from his teaching.

Then followed the shock of his arrest, torture and horrific death. Reeling in bewilderment at God's failure to intervene, they were devastated. Disillusionment reigned, all seemed over. Locked in the upper room at first for fear of the authorities, they soon returned to their earlier life.

The risen Lord's appearances changed everything, even if repeated encounters were needed for them to assimilate and understand the implications of what had happened. Jesus' new form of presence and his instructions opened their eyes to see their experience in a totally new perspective, while ancient biblical texts began to take on new meaning for them.

Attracted by their message, new members "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." (Acts 2:42). Well-to-do converts were spontaneously sharing their goods with the poorer members so that "there was not a needy person among them" (cf. Acts 4:34). A wholly new way of life was coming into existence as they themselves were feeling within themselves hitherto unsuspected resources of courage and initiative.

Following Vatican II our Chapter has urged us to see this experience as our goal.

The Spirit of God gives us the impetus to extend our communion in the Upper Room by journeying together with the whole Church: lay people, religious, clergy. He makes us joyful evangelizers who set the world ablaze with Eucharistic fire (RoL 3). Our mission flows from our experience of the Upper Room, the experience in which Jesus becomes incarnate in our midst to bring about the Reign of God in the modern world (Jn 14:25-26, RoL 36).

For this to become real in our ministry a certain context is called for, just as with the earliest communities. Here is our big challenge.

To what extent do the people who frequent our churches for Sunday Mass feel in any way comparable to the early Christians gathered around the Lord's table as a community of sisters and brothers?

The vast majority probably do not know one another personally; many will never have shared their experiences of faith with others beyond their families or prayerfully shared the Word with other believers. How many will leave Sunday Mass with the feeling of a personal call to evangelize by word and example?

Here, I believe, is the important challenge that we as a Congregation dedicated to the Eucharist must focus on in pursuing the process of synodality. For the Chapter urges us "to extend our communion in the Upper Room by journeying together with the whole Church".

The challenge here is precisely in the conditions required for "our communion in the Upper Room." For the activation of the energy and power of the Eucharist depends also on the attitudes and experience of the people who are present at Mass.

Reflection on the theme of "synodality" sharpens our awareness of the persisting effects of centuries of a clericalist church, of what has been called "sacramental individualism".

Early in the church's journey the structures and language of the class-based aristocratic societies of its time were adopted, even to

creating the role of a “prince bishop” (that is, a bishop who was also a ruler of some secular principality).³

Saintly founders of religious orders especially have attempted again and again over the centuries, to remind the church of the inspiration of its humble origins. Francis of Assisi comes to mind, focusing attention on the privileged place of the poor in Jesus’ eyes; or Dominic Guzman legislating for his communities “an inclusive form of governance, in which all shared in the process of discernment and decision-making”⁴ – but never leading to change in church practice!

How many of our people come to church on Sundays to fulfil their religious duty, whether as individuals, or with family or friends? To what extent do they really see themselves as members of God’s people gathering with their sisters and brothers in baptism in order to become heralds of the Good News?

While in no way wishing to question the sincerity of their faith and motives for coming to Sunday Mass, we can ask, how many feel their participation in the rites to be what we are calling a synodal experience? Is not this our most demanding challenge?

Attempts to change things are already under way in certain dioceses inaugurating synodal processes with energy and imagination, promoting initiatives where people can meet and share their experience of their faith, their hopes and aspirations as well as their difficulties and questions. I read of one diocese in which a lay coordinator has been appointed in every single parish to inaugurate the process.

Turning back to ourselves, we are invited to be active participants in this process with a special attention to how the liturgy, and centrally the Eucharist, is celebrated in this context of synodal renewal. If that will mean exploring ways of celebrating each part of the rite that brings home to the participants their meaning and the way

³ Just think that it was not until 1951 that Pope Pius XII finally abolished the title!

⁴ Fr. Gerard Francisco P. Timoner III, OP, Master of the Order, “Eucharist, Source and Paradigm of Synodality”. Letter to the Order, October 8, 2024.

it reinforces their identity, it means also creating a new style of parish life outside Sunday worship.

For the real difficulty is the way people experience their belonging to the Christian community. A vast process of transformation is called for in overcoming sacramental individualism and bringing ourselves and our people to a new consciousness of what it means to gather around the Lord's table and celebrate a Paschal Mystery that involves each one of us to the depths of our being as members of God's people – not as an individual amongst strangers whom I happen to meet only at church on Sundays, but with others whom we recognise as the brothers and sisters of Jesus and of ourselves thanks to our shared faith.

This is certainly a challenging task at a time, in the Western world, when vocations are plummeting and parishes are being amalgamated. It is especially daunting for those of us who minister in city-centre churches that are not parishes; people come from far and wide for a variety of reasons. Whilst we have excellent volunteers and groups here in Melbourne we have little chance of getting to know most of the people who frequent our church.

As more and more people begin to identify with this vision, the Eucharist will increasingly come to be, and be perceived to be, source and summit of the church's life, embodying a shared spirituality that will motivate the sense of involvement with the church and its synodal movement and of personal engagement in its evangelising mission in the world.

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