**Clergy Conference *Novotel Wollongong April 2-5 2024***

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 ***How can synodality help me grow as a person, disciple and leader of faith***

 ***communities committed to mission?***

**OR Synodality is a doing Word !**

**Why Synodality?**

The brief here is to look at the potential within the concept of Synodality for the individual priest or deacon to grow as a person, disciple or leader of a missionary community. So, I guess, the brief is to examine the human dimension of Synodality. Well, it is humans who will enter into the Pope’s invitation to think together under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. From this perspective, humans are indispensable.

How will participation in the process of Synodality allow you, as ordained ministers of the gospel, to assist the faithful to come into an experience of Christ?

I am speaking as a psychologist, interested in how humans think, feel and behave in a variety of circumstances, and why they do. And this workshop won’t just focus on all the good things that synodality has going for it, but rather a realistic evaluation of what the Pope is trying to achieve here, what benefits might ensue, and how they might be achieved.

Let’s look at the word “*Synodality*” which has become a buzz word for broader participation of all Catholics in the Church’s life and governance. What’s the difference between a Synod and Synodality? A Synod is a legacy of Vatican 11, where issues of importance to the Church are addressed. The current Synod is the 16th. The Pope wants attention on the manner in which these important matters are discussed.

I believe that Pope Francis’ instinct is right. There are a plethora of competing voices among Church members at the moment. The conservative voice is over against the liberal. The traditionalist is voicing different concerns than the so called progressive. As far as the Pope is concerned, before we go on, we have to learn how to talk together. You can’t work anything out together if you can’t talk about it. There are many vested interests in the outcome of this upcoming Synod, and many are in conflict and separated from each other. So, the Pope wants us to begin talking across the many divides, and to talk openly, with compassion and candour and in a respectful attentive manner, to get the conflicts out in the open, so to speak. For the Pope, synodality is about journeying together under the action of the Spirit within the communion of the body of Christ and the missionary journey of the people of God. It involves discernment, dialogue and shared decision making.

It seems to me that the Pope, with the initiating of the Synod process and citing the Holy Spirit as its protagonist, has kicked the Church into crisis and is trusting that the Holy Spirit will sort it all out!

Now the actualising of what has been initiated here is vast in scope and complex in execution. The goal of this 16th synod is to shed light, not on a particular goal like priestly formation, but on the process of achieving an understanding of and participation in the process of dialogue whereby any goal might be reached. There has been much content on the many practical issues that such a goal might raise. However, ideas can change culture, and allowing the faithful to imagine the prospect of voicing their opinion is now a bell that cannot be unrung.

Now conversation, dialogue within the Church has always existed, of course, in one form or another. It hasn’t had to wait for a Synod on Synodality for conversation to begin.

However, the Church has not always been ready to have such a focused, self- conscious conversation where differences are expressed openly and articulated respectfully, and I wonder if it ever would be unless mandated to do so. Nevertheless, a process has started.

**A bit of background first.**

The current conference input is structured on the template of four pillars of priestly formation, set out in the document *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, (hereafter referred to as PDV) namely, the human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral. Why is this? Lets look a bit further. PDV was the fruit of the 8th ordinary general assembly of the Bishops’ Synod, convened during Sept Oct 1990. Archbishop Schotte, General of the Synod of Bishops, referred to the Synod of Bishops as one of the first and most direct fruits of the Second Vatican Council. He said that every Synod is an event of great importance which contributes continuously to the process of implementing and deepening the Council’s intention to ensure the Church’s continuous updating. PDV presents a multifaceted approach to priesthood with a special emphasis on priestly formation. It is a post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation and is subtitled. *The Formation of Priests in Circumstances of the present Day.*

PDV was the first official magisterial document to use the term “ human formation”, a concept that had hitherto been either assumed or overlooked. In spite of what appears to be its commonsense meaning, it bears closer inspection. *Pastores Dabo Vobis* endeavours to spell out what a psychologically healthy priest should be. It focused on the human person first and foremost, and what a priestly formation should assist in producing.

 As one would expect, only the most positive aspects of the individual are listed there. It lists what sort of human person the priest should be and is somewhat idealised. It stresses the importance of the priest’s capacity to relate to others and his affective maturity. It is right as far as it goes of course but is expressed in as a mix of positive psychology and the theological virtues.

The 4 pillar template is now 32 years old. It is still a template that is used, not only in priestly formation, but as a lens through which clergy are encouraged to self-reflect. A good example is this conference.

I was employed back in 1991 at St Patricks College, Manly at about the same time as PDV was promulgated to look after the newly minted Human Formation Program at the Seminary. This saw the introduction of psychology into the program of priestly formation. Implicit in this introduction was the fact that students could talk about their experiences to develop self-understanding. And talk they did. And the culture of the seminary changed from one way dialogue from staff to student, to students and staff talking together.

This workshop session is an endeavour to link the concept *Synodality* to that category of human formation which the 8th Synod gave birth to. Once again, there is a focusing on a human capacity- this time, to dialogue, to talk together, to listen, to respect the other’s difference.

**Synodality as a process, not a talkfest**

In my opinion, the current Synod on “Synodality” is another stage on from that previous Synod, back in 1990. It invites reflection on **the process** of getting together to discuss issues of great importance to the life of the Church, i.e. the nitty gritty of dialoguing, hearing alternate points of view and countenancing them and putting up with resultant tensions. More particularly, it seeks to focus on how the Spirit is moving through and with the Body of Christ in the human reality of dialogue, both inside and outside the Church, so that the mission of evangelisation can be fulfilled.

While the term *Synodality* gets less precise in providing direction the more you think about it, it’s true that ideas shape culture. So how is the idea of Synodality likely to shape Church culture? How is it likely to help you as pastors pay attention to what you have to pay attention to?

**Let’s look at some of the practical challenges from a psychological perspective before we look at the possibilities. There are, frankly, difficulties with what Francis is attempting to initiate. Let’s get them out of the way first before looking at those possibilities.**

Our starting point here, once again, is the human reality. Synodality focuses us, not on the ideal priest, but on the messy starting point of one human being endeavouring to journey together with another human being, be they bishop, priest or lay, and where both are endeavouring to live and spread the gospel and talk to each other. And the focus is not on seminaries here, not on the presbyterate, (the easy bit) but on all the people of God. To term this a big call is an understatement.

SO…there is a shift in focus from what makes up a functioning, integrated human who may be called to priesthood, into the realm of relationship, which both precedes, and is the result of, dialogue, and to how those relationships should proceed in the ecclesial structure. This is the hard bit. (I much prefer individual therapy to couple or family counselling. It’s easier.)

So…implicit in the term *Synodality* is the notion of dialogue. This idea has opened up Pandora’s box on the Church’s day to day functioning. If dialogue was easy, it would probably happen more frequently.

To the quote from Matthew; 18; 19-20. *Where 2 or 3 are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of you,* could be added  *and believe me it won’t be easy!*

**Listening…not as easy as it seems.**

The typical dimensions that characterize a synodal style are listening, openness to others’ opinions, discernment and maintaining communion while bearing tensions around disagreement. Let’s look at one of these dimensions, that of listening. This sounds like a commonsense injunction. Anyone can do it if they have the intention to do so, surely? Unfortunately, this is not so, its not easy. Conversation is the primary means of reaching understanding between people. When we engage in dialogue with another, there is an exchange of words, but also an exchange of persons. This happens to varying degrees and intensities. If I truly listen to the other, I will be affected by their communication. And vice versa. My subjectivity will be affected by the other’s subjectivity. True dialogue raises emotions on both sides and those emotions can be raised before my intellect gets into gear.

The human sciences have studied at length what happens to the human person when engaged in dialogue about an issue that is important to both of them. It is almost impossible for a dialogue to be equal in emotional intensity on both sides…one will assume the role of listener more than the other. Because of the emotional impact of listening, deep feelings can be elicited and clarity of thought can go out the window. But the more you do it, the better you get at it. Eventually, one starts to notice the emergence within oneself of what psychologists call *meta-cognition*, which is the capacity to monitor oneself as one dialogues, to change pace, to refocus, to assess the level of arousal, and recalibrate energy and to monitor my motivation. Am I seeking to be in communion with my dialogical partner, or do I seek to dominate, to get my own way? In my opinion this kind of thinking , which involves honest self-reflection, is an invitation to the Holy Spirit to animate the dialogue. The Holy Spirit’s portal to the soul of the human person is via the human experience, which incidentally involves sensory data travelling to the brain’s emotional centre, the limbic system. Listening is a very bodily experience. I will feel what I hear, before I have a thought about it, and the emotion generated, if unacknowledged, will affect my thinking.

(*Illustration of the triune brain*) 

Listening is also a spiritual discipline. When we listen to another when it is important to do so, we make ourselves vulnerable to the other. Why vulnerable? Because I may be invaded by a truth that I am not ready for. We have an example of challenge in Mark’s gospel, where Jesus is challenged by the Syro -Phoenician woman, ( Mark 7; 24-30.) Most of the time we are unconsciously scanning to hear something that is affirming of me and my values, or that is comforting and soothing, or that is true. Its hard to let another’s truth take up residence in me sufficiently so that I can understand it.

But a lot of what we have to hear is difficult to countenance, eg innocent suffering, complaining about the current state of the Church, gossiping about others, spiritual rigidity, blaming others, the hysteria of sudden grief, being misunderstood.

But if I am to hear and interpret rightly, I must be able to interpret correctly what is being said, and that will require me to cope with being affected by what I hear. I need to ask the question…why do I feel so distressed, so challenged, so uncomfortable? And not dismiss it, but wait for the answer to occur to me…….this usually requires another to help me…a seasoned spiritual director, psychologically minded supervisor.

Isaiah 50, which we have just read in Holy Week states that

*The Lord has given me the tongue of discipleship to sustain the weary with a word. He awakens me morning by morning. He awakens my ear to listen as a disciple.*

 To listen like a disciple, I need to build within myself an expectation that I may hear the Spirit’s presence and demand for truth through the words of another who addresses me.

**Question. Can I imagine that listening attentively and letting myself be affected by what I hear will assist my disciple leadership?**

**Do I think dialogue will allow discernment of the Spirit ‘s guidance of the Church?**

Other questions/challenges also arise that house ideas that might change culture.

1. What of the implicit hierarchical structure of the ecclesial reality? Does this get in the way of dialogue? In my observation, it does. There is, first of all, psychological inhibition, when speaking to authority. And some priests find it difficult, if not impossible, to dialogue with their bishop. This is just a fact. So what do I do….. give up? Or keep reflecting on what is going wrong? How does this sort of reflecting sit within the current attempt to shift into dialogical gear?
2. There is pressure on Bishops to manifest synodality. I feel great sympathy here, because bishops can’t listen to everyone. So how to calibrate what needs to be heard, so a bishop can hear it? Dialogue, conversation can’t be friendly and spontaneous at this level….so who organises the dialogue? What are their biases, prejudices, blind spots? Individuals can think they are entering into a reciprocal dialogue but we all have blind spots.
3. The laity need appropriate formation so that they can enter a dialogue. Adult education courses that provide solid Catholic foundations are solely needed. Courses should include basic theological thinking, Church history, how to read scripture, and the sacraments. A degree in theology costing many thousands of dollars should not be the only resource, whether its online or not.

1. The Church still has to be administered to. This is an era where all opinions, informed or not, assume an entitlement to expression. Can you listen to everyone who has an opinion? There are limits to listening, How do the opinions of the faithful reach the ear of authority? And what of the authority’s capacity to listen? And does everyone’s opinion need to be listened to?
2. The so called “human” and “spiritual dimensions” of the human person need to be brought together conceptually. Where once there was a focus on God’s transcendence, now it is on God’s immanence. Both are needed.
3. The lifestyle of celibacy in diocesan priesthood needs to be considered. This lifestyle can militate against relationality.
4. There are some individuals who are simply not able to dialogue. Dialogical conversation is a skill that can be learned but not by everyone. You need at least 2 parties to a dialogue, preferably where both are able to listen to and understand what the other is saying. This is not always the case, particularly for those who are not articulate relationally, are highly introverted or who are frankly neurodiverse.
5. Psychology needs no longer to be viewed with suspicion. It needs to be put where it belongs…an auxiliary discipline which has hermeneutical value about the human condition, and that can enable us to observe and understand what happens when people successfully talk, dialogue, and converse, and what goes wrong when dialogue goes off the rails. Dialogue doesn’t always solve problems, in fact, it can surface even more complexity. But the alternative is to stay mute, and I think the Pope would see this as a stifling of the Holy Spirit.
6. Thinking of the human person as made in the image and likeness of God, to reference Genesis, is different to humanistic thinking, where the human is not made in any other image than an actualized ideal self. Psychology is capable of supporting either perspective on the human person.

The Synod is already acting as a corrective to communication within the Church. As a result of this Synod, autocratic, top-down, one-way communication to clergy from Bishops and VG’s will still happen, of course, but I believe such communication will appear less and less acceptable in the way that individual Dioceses conduct their administration. It remains to be seen whether this will allow the broader ecclesial culture to move closer to what the Pope envisages.

It may be that future Synods could focus on authority within the Church and formation for the laity to discern their call to mission.

So, in short, the possibilities are that

* dialogue, true dialogue, starts to become normed within the Church.
* possibilities are created to learn the skills that enable this to happen.

The cautionary notes are that

* the concept of synodality is difficult to truly implement. An imprimatur will not do it. Skills need to be learned from the behavioural sciences.
* The concept will stay at the level of abstraction, or be misunderstood as encouraging talking with no action.
* The importance of skills training will be down played.

**Resources.**

* Supervision
* The work of pastoral theologian, John Swinton. Implicit in his work is the centrality of human person.