



A synodal church in mission? One Australian perspective

Introduction

This is a submission from *Catholics for Renewal*, a reform group based mainly in Melbourne, but with members and readers of our Newsletter located throughout Australia and the world. This submission is our response to the question posed by the Synod General Secretariat: **How can we be a synodal Church in mission?** We begin our submission by stating our understanding of what is meant by the phrase ‘synodal Church in mission’.

We then proceed to respond in the light of our own discernment to the questions suggested by the Secretariat for determining how our church might become a synodal one in mission.

What is a synodal Church in Mission?

1) Theological basis of synodality

The basis for the theology of ecclesial synodality is Vatican II’s restored understanding of the Church as the People of God, on its pilgrim journey through history, forming a communion in the Spirit. Synodality refers to the Spirit-given dynamism that renders the church by nature a people on mission rather than a mere set of more or less inert institutional structures.

That dynamism consists in our participation in the divine life which is a life of reciprocal love between the Persons of the Trinity. That life is dynamic because one who participates in it cannot but radiate that love to others: true love is by nature self-spreading; divine love is irrepressibly so.

2) ‘Mission’ in a synodal church

The church, as a communion in the Spirit, is by nature a radiator of this divine love to all humankind (sacramentum mundi: *Lumen Gentium* ch. 1). The theological concept of ‘mission’ is a theoretical tool for designating the nature of the church as the radiator of God’s love to the world¹.

¹ There are, of course, a range of theological concepts for defining the church and its mission. However, they all find their foundation in the reciprocal love of the Trinity in which the church shares, and which is by nature self-spreading. The Kingdom of God, for example, is the state of affairs among humans where love reigns; the good news is that God offers all humans a share in this divine life of reciprocal love; repentance and conversion means turning away from the pursuit of ways of life that refuse this offer, and turning to ways that embrace it; becoming members of the Body of Christ means incorporation into this dynamism of reciprocal divine love through uniting ourselves to Christ through the power of his Spirit. The term ‘mission’ is misconstrued – possibly with disastrous consequences – if it is not understood primarily as a radiation of divine love to others.

However, God did not simply accomplish his purpose by imposing his planned order on it from the outset. Instead God chose to complete his work of creation by working within it, even to the point of sending his own son to become incarnate in human history. God's choice was to involve humankind in the accomplishment of that purpose. That choice entailed acceptance of the limitations imposed by the finite nature of the cosmos. Cosmic order had to evolve from chaos, and humankind had to evolve as a species within that order (cf. *Gaudium et Spes* n. 5). The evolutionary processes from chaos by definition are processes from inferior to superior states, meaning that they will be fraught with events that we would term evil in the sense that they are natural disasters. Resistance to the rise of order in the natural world is thus due to the original chaos from which that order had to evolve. Indeed, as they evolved, human beings too evolved the capacity of choosing evil, of resisting the order to which God was calling them, and thus of sin. The triumph of God's love in the creation, though ultimately assured, requires the free collaboration of humankind with God's creative/saving work in human history. The church's mission is to be the sign of that collaboration.

As the People of God, the church exercises that mission under the conditions imposed by history. The call of God's Spirit to it is revealed only little by little in the signs of the times. Consequently, its own response to that call, and the strength of the loving relationship expressed by the response, is necessarily an evolving one.

Dominance of the People of God by a particular group will be incompatible with the Spirit-driven dynamism of love that enlivens it. While the Spirit's gifts, and the roles they entail, will differ, all will be equally important to the People's progress on its pilgrimage to its divinely ordained destiny. The pre-Vatican II rigid resistance to lay participation in church governance is thus clearly at odds with the notion of the church as a People united by the Spirit-driven dynamism of love. A church driven by this love will adapt its structures to meet the call of the signs of the times revealed in the evolution of history.

The evolving character of the signs of the times also implies that the church's understanding of the call of the Spirit expressed through them – its contemporary mission – must likewise evolve. Thus, its characterisation of its message in its doctrines, and its expression of their consequences in laws and practices, must also evolve. When a particular group is 'excluded from the tent' in light of a doctrine based on a superseded scientific presupposition, the dynamism of love for all is resisted in favour of the security supposedly offered by an earlier community's response to the question as they experienced it in their time.

The shelter offered by firm doctrines and laws is always challenged by the anomaly of people one loves, and that we are all as Christians bound to love, being victims of the effects of these doctrines and laws. Pope Francis has offered valuable leadership on the primacy of love by calling first of all for mercy towards those in irregular relationships with the church. Decisions about their inclusion or exclusion from its communion could defy resolution indefinitely if they were based on the doctrinal and legal arguments relating to them. However, when we are all alerted to the primary demand of love for people in these relationships, the claims of the exclusionary doctrines and laws are diminished in force as our love for these people grows.

Lest these remarks be taken to be shots fired in a cultural war between opposing theological schools, let it be said that the same dynamism of love is at odds with the hostility engendered by these theological differences. Genuine love for one another will surely enable settlements to be reached that are acceptable to the contending parties. Indeed, genuine love will drive both parties on until such settlements are reached. The church will be truly synodal to the extent that it strives to resolve disputes under the force of this dynamism of love. It will also be synodal in mission to the extent that

its members unite in their efforts to radiate that love to all, including those outside the church's visible boundaries.

Ways of making church more synodal

1) Enhancing the role of laity

Evidence from Australia and around the world demonstrates that there has been a massive fall-off in religious practice in general and in the Catholic church in particular². It is clear from this evidence that the ways in which the church is presently organised to witness to the Catholic faith to the world are no longer fit for purpose – no longer synodal in the sense outlined in the previous section. To make the church more synodal, therefore, it is imperative that changes be made to its old ways of doing things. The first of those changes, in our opinion, should be that the autonomy of the laity's mission, which emerged in the first half of the twentieth century and was acclaimed by Vatican II, be fully accepted by the church and the required adjustments made to the roles of laity and hierarchy in governance, liturgy and preaching of the word.

In Australia the development of lay 'apostles' to apply the 'see, judge and act' method to the secular world under the influence of Mgr. Joseph Cardijn began at the level of local communities. Vatican II placed beyond doubt the autonomy of the lay apostolate from the mission of the hierarchy. However, in differentiating that autonomy from the mission of the bishops, the church opened up the question of where the lines of differentiation between the two were to be drawn. As the Synthesis Report acknowledges, the line Vatican II attempted to draw was between the *spheres* to which the mandate of each applied:

Vatican II and subsequent magisterial teaching present the distinctive mission of the laity in terms of the sanctification of temporal or secular realities. However, the reality is that pastoral practice at the parish, diocesan and, recently, even universal levels, increasingly entrusts lay people with tasks and ministries within the Church itself (8 j).

The Synod itself would seem to be acknowledging here that distinguishing between the spheres of their mandates does not sufficiently differentiate their ministries. Could it be therefore that the Synod, though justified in maintaining a differentiation between ministries, is nonetheless being called by the Holy Spirit to re-define the boundaries of this differentiation?

Since Vatican II, if not earlier, lay people have been exercising roles of *governance* in church institutions that were previously regarded as closed to them: principals, Religious Education coordinators in Catholic schools, lecturers in theology and biblical studies in Catholic tertiary institutions, heads of diocesan educational, health and social services bureaucracies, as well as executive responsibilities in diocesan administrative structures, to name a few examples. The Archdioceses of Adelaide and Brisbane have even appointed lay women to positions of executive authority in their diocesan administration structures. Perhaps most notably, pope Francis has himself appointed a woman religious (in canon law still a lay person) to the General Secretariat to the Synod *with voting rights*. Moreover, he has removed the ban on lay persons being heads of Roman

² In Australia, average weekly Mass attendance has decreased significantly. In 1978 over 1 million Catholics or 30% of the total Catholic population, attended weekly Mass. In 2006 only 708,616 or 13.8% of all Catholics, attended weekly Mass, and in 2016 just 623,376 or 11.8% of all Australian Catholics. The average weekly Mass attendance of young people aged 15-24 years, who constitute 13.4% of all Australian Catholics, was 6.9% in 2016.

dicasteries. This laicisation of the church's ministry as regards governance at least could hardly be regarded as contrary to the impulse of the Spirit.

The line of differentiation between lay and clerical *liturgical* roles has however been more firmly held. The sacramental ministry, particularly of the Eucharist, has remained the preserve of the ordained minister. But even here it is evident that this line is under some pressure. Nuns are baptising in Germany, other lay people are exercising liturgical ministries and Pastoral Associates are exercising ministries of the Word. These phenomena raise for this Synod this question: are these phenomena merely a sign of the lack of priests, or are they rather signs that the church is being called to rethink its definition of the role of sacramental ministry?

The Synod Report itself raises the question of whether the celibate form of the priesthood designed for the church of the Middle Ages is fit for today's church:

Different opinions have been expressed about priestly celibacy. Its value is appreciated by all as richly prophetic and a profound witness to Christ; some ask, however, whether its appropriateness, theologically, for priestly ministry should necessarily translate into a disciplinary obligation in the Latin Church, above all in ecclesial and cultural contexts that make it more difficult. This discussion is not new but requires further consideration (11 f).

Such further consideration might ask whether, like deacons today, priests are not also more appropriately recruited from married lay people, exercising secular occupations and with their spouses raising children in the modern world. It is apparent to us also that increasingly houses originally built to accommodate the priests staffing our parishes are being vacated because there are no longer any priests to fill them. So many of these houses are now offices from which lay people conduct the administration of the parishes. Synodal reflection must ask whether these phenomena are signs from the Spirit that new forms of priestly ministry are being called for, and that it is lay people demonstrating competence to preach the Word whom we ought to be ordaining. Considered in this light, the possibility available to synodal discernment might be that suitable candidates for such ministry are already close at hand in the numbers of lay persons already trained for, and exercising, ministries of the Word in our parishes. There are a number of Pastoral Associates in the Archdiocese of Melbourne who are theologically trained, and who feel called to continue in that ministry. Could it be that the Archdiocese needs to ask itself whether the Spirit is not calling for a development of this ministry in our local church? The fact that many Pastoral Associates are also women raises the question of the implications of synodality for the role of women in the church.

2) Enhancing the role of women

Unfortunately, to many women both inside and outside its boundaries, the church has become a sign of exclusion rather than inclusion because of its insistence on its authority to teach on matters primarily affecting women while persisting in patriarchal structures based on flawed anthropologies which deny them an equal say with men on these and other matters.

Members of our group see the openness of the Synod to the possibility of admitting women to the diaconate as a sign of the movement of the Spirit. We would therefore see admission of women to the diaconate – should that eventuate – as a major relaxation of the church's exclusion of women from liturgical roles: their exercise of those roles would signify the church becoming more synodal in mission. By refusing access to the higher Orders, however, the Synod risks the accusation of tokenistic appeasement of women clamouring for justice, and even of conceding the principle of female admissibility to Orders but protecting male dominance of such Orders by restricting female admission to its lowest level. A Spirit-driven love could not tolerate such tokenism for very long.

Of course, it would be widely disputed that admission of women to the diaconate would concede this principle. Indeed, the Synod's argument for differentiating the roles of men and women in the church was that their equal dignity was not impugned by such differentiation because of the 'complementarity and reciprocity' (Report 9 a) of their roles. However, we see some evidence of further discernment on this issue in the Australian church.

Members of the Australian Plenary Council (PC) acknowledged the vulnerability of women's status in the church to, among other things, elements of the prevailing 'culture':

It (the PC) commits the Church to enhancing the role of women in the Church, and to overcoming assumptions, culture, practices and language that lead to inequality (Decree 4, para 6).

The possibility that the asserted 'complementarity and reciprocity' of the female to the male role may be a cultural assumption rather than a revealed truth is arguably adverted to in this decree of the Australian Plenary Council. Indeed, for the reasons we will now outline, our group believes that the evolution of the church's consciousness of women's dignity has now reached the point where the cultural rather than revealed nature of this assumption is no longer deniable.

The Church teaches the concept of "complementarity" by which it espouses the binary sex and gender system that requires all of us to be male-masculine or female-feminine. The sexes are split apart as masculine and feminine characteristics (gender) are allocated to males and females (sex). There is no argument that men and women are born (mostly) different *sexes*. But *gender* is not God-given but a social construction that we choose or refuse. For example, when the human attribute and virtue of care is allocated by the church to women only, as being of her essence, or special nature, then men, not being caring in their essence can, at best, only mimic the human practice of care.

To argue that men (sex) are like this (masculine in gender), and women (sex) are like that (feminine in gender) then we are not only confused but also diminished: The dual anthropology of complementarity precludes each of us from ever being fully human. If, on the other hand we are all capable of manifesting all human attributes and virtues, we are all fully human. Then there is no need to talk about the possible "roles" women and men can perform - he can stay home to mind the children and she can go to the parish to minister, as deacon or priest.

Of its very nature, a synodal church is called to discern signs of the times from acquiescence in the spirit of the times. In discerning the claim for removal of these restrictions on women, we ask that the Synod recognise (a) the cultural rather than revealed basis of the restrictions, and (b) the disinterested nature of women's quest: women seek their removal not to increase their status in the church but to increase their ability to exercise their vocations in it in accordance with the aspirations of the Synod Report itself (9 h).

3) Enhancing the role of the laity in diocesan and parish structures

Being driven by love, synodality can hardly be imposed. However, its development can be greatly encouraged by exhortation from above. We think valuable leadership would be provided by the pope if he were to issue an Apostolic Exhortation to local churches to make the following innovations to their structures and practices:

- a. that every diocesan bishop be required to establish a Diocesan Pastoral Council whose members – who can be clerics, religious and laity representing the diocese's regions, social conditions, professions, and apostolates – should be selected and elected with a synodal process which ensures the equal representation of women and men.

- b. that every diocesan bishop be required to convene a Diocesan Synod every 10 years, whose members, with full voting rights, can be clerics, religious and laity representing the diocese's regions, social conditions, professions, and apostolates, and should be selected and elected with a synodal process which ensures the equal representation of women and men.
- c. that every diocesan bishop be required to publish a Diocesan Annual Report which contains a full and transparent account of the pastoral and financial state of the diocese and the future plans of the bishop to address the diocese's pastoral and financial challenges.
- d. that every diocesan bishop requires the parish priests of the diocese to establish a Parish Pastoral Council whose members – who can be clerics, religious and laity representing the parish's schools, welfare and social groups, and lay ministries – are selected and elected with a synodal process which ensures male and female equality.
- e. that every diocesan bishop requires the parish priests of the diocese to publish a Parish Annual Report which contains a full and transparent account of the pastoral and financial state of the parish.

Conclusion

Catholics for Renewal welcomes the establishment by Pope Francis of the study groups on the ten themes he has enumerated for further exploration as part of the synodal process. We recognise that in what we submit in this response to the Synod we are expressing views on some of these matters. Our justification for doing so is the urgency we see as attaching to these matters in enabling the church to become 'synodal in mission'. In our view the dynamism of love that constitutes the church *synodal in mission* is impeded to the extent that some continue to be excluded from the tent, and others are impeded in the exercise of their roles within it. We trust therefore that Synod members will note the urgency we attach to these issues, and that they will feel encouraged to share our sense of urgency.

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