

HOW CAN THE CHURCH BE 'SYNODAL IN MISSION' IN THE 21st C?

or

In the 21st C what should the church be and what should it be doing?

Michael Leahy

In the first three centuries of its history, the church was synodal. All members of the community shared in responsibility for its mission according to their gifts and the needs of the day. From the fourth century onwards, however, the church gradually replaced the pagan religions as the official religion of the Roman Empire, and its leaders became paid officials of the state. The church thus became *hierarchialised* in its organisation and *clericalized* in the assignment of responsibilities for that mission, and synodality was consequently eroded.

Ancient societies had typically believed in their dependence upon the favour of the gods for their welfare. Worship of the gods thus formed an important part of public life in such societies. Hence, as well as institutions to take care of profane affairs the Roman Empire included significant institutions dedicated to sacred affairs. Indeed, the Romans saw the two realms as interdependent. This was a *sacralised* world in the sense that it was universally believed that natural phenomena and human welfare depended on the influence of the gods, and that the world needed to organise itself to reflect that belief.

The church had believed of course in the dependence of the world upon God, but as a loosely knit group of scattered communities it had not become part of the sacred structures of any society in which it was present, and indeed was sporadically persecuted by the Romans for refusing to do so. By its incorporation into Roman Empire in the 4th century, however, the church became part of those sacred structures, merely supplanting within them over time the older pagan religions.

Over the Middle Ages this intertwinement of church and state tightened, and the authority of the church to govern in sacred affairs became universally accepted. The performance of the church's function, thus understood, required an extensive array of institutions, and a large number of accredited officers. These structural arrangements also affected the church's conception of its mission: how it understood what it was, in other words, affected what it thought it should be doing.

The mission of the church in this sacralised and clericalized world was conceived as converting non-believers in the doctrines of the church to acceptance of them, and keeping members of the sacralised world faithful to them and obedient to the authority of the divinely appointed institution for teaching them. Clerical dominance all but supplanted synodality by reducing the role of the laity to voices crying in the wilderness for admission to their rightful place and function in the church.

The sacralised world was undermined over time, particularly by the European Enlightenment: people stopped believing in a world dependent upon divine interventions in it (desacralisation). They consequently stopped believing also in the need for an institution to mediate divine influence in human affairs (secularisation). Moreover, the church's understanding of herself as God's authority on

earth for converting people to this sacred vision, and for ensuring existing believers remained faithful to their belief, was sorely challenged by the anomaly of even her own baptised deserting that authority in droves. If she was to avoid reduction to a hierarchy with virtually no laity, and with nothing of interest to say to the world, then, the church needed to rethink what it was and what it should be doing in this world. In 1962, Pope John XXIII convened a world council of bishops – the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II) – to launch that rethinking.

The documents of Vatican II that formed the axis of this rethinking were the one on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*) and the one on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*). The former restored the self-understanding of the church as the people called by God to be the sign of God's action in human history to bring creation to its completion. The latter spelt out the meaning of that self-understanding for the church's role in addressing the deepest human yearnings, anxieties and aspirations in the evolution of that history. Rather than the arbitrator of its beliefs and laws, the church was to be a fellow pilgrim engaged in loving service of humanity after the example of Jesus in the gospel.

These axial documents laid the foundation for rethinking what the church should be doing in the world. Preaching the gospel – the general definition of the church's mission – could no longer be understood in the terms developed for the sacralised world: to convert people to its beliefs, and to keep people faithful to them. Rather the gospel had to be preached by witnessing to its effectiveness in the lives of believers themselves. In the words of the late Italian theologian, Don Carlo Molari: *to reveal God in our own lives* – thus to announce the truth of God – and *to make our own lives testimonies to the saving efficacy of the Gospel of Jesus* (Molari, Carlo 2007).

For Molari the church's mission needs to be *laicised* because the problems and needs of the world that need to be addressed by this saving love are to be found in families, workplaces, social and political institutions. They are problems of conflict, injustice, greed and envy, and the people who suffer them value ways of addressing them that are intrinsic to the problems themselves rather than abstract doctrines that seem so remote from their experience. Effective witness to the saving efficacy of the love exemplified by Jesus, therefore, can only be borne by those committed to that love who are present in these secular locations i.e. the lay people.

A laicised church need not mean one where there are no bishops and priests. Rather it will mean that bishops and priests will no longer form a dominating class within the community, with the laity participating in its mission only at the invitation and under the control of this class. Bishops and priests are more likely to be themselves workers in the secular world, and even married with children.

Without a dominant class, such a church will be synodal provided that it lives out its gospel commitment of love for one another, love such that its warmth radiates to those outside the church itself.

Molari, C 2007, 'Laicita', paper presented to Equipe Notre Dame, Torino, <https://www.notedipastoralegiovanile.it/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=297:laicita&catid=384:percorsi-educativo-pastorali&Itemid=63>.