

Synodal Pathway:

Communion, Participation, Mission:

An Interview with Cardinal Mario Grech

Cardinal Mario Grech, Secretary General of the Synod of Bishops, Bishop emeritus of Gozo, was born in Qala, Malta, in the Diocese of Gozo on 20 February 1957.

On 26 November 2005 Pope Benedict XVI appointed him as Bishop of Gozo, where he served until 2 October 2019, when he was appointed by Pope Francis as pro-Secretary General of the Synod of Bishops. He received episcopal consecration on the 22 January 2006.

On 15 September 2020 he was appointed as Secretary General of the Synod of Bishops.

In this interview, Julieann Moran, General Secretary for the Synodal Pathway of the Catholic Church in Ireland, speaks to Cardinal Grech about the current stage of the Universal Synodal Pathway, and how the Church in Ireland can surf the wave of this process.

Q: What do you think was the inspiration behind the Holy Father's undertaking of a Synod on synodality at this time?

I think one of the main reasons the Holy Father is inviting the Church to be more synodal is in view of evangelisation. Synodality and evangelisation are two sides of the same coin. I'm pretty sure that the Holy Father is passionate about helping the human person encounter Jesus, because Jesus is the reason for our lives. His message, His person is light to the world. After all, this is what the Church is called to be, a missionary Church. It's good to remind ourselves that the theme of this Synod is 'For a Synodal Church: communion, participation, and mission.' The fact that mission is the last word does not mean it is the least important. I would say mission is the most important element. I think the Holy Father would like to set the world on fire by proclaiming the Gospel. Obviously, he cannot do this by himself, but he wants all the people of God to get engaged in this mission. When I say all the people of God, I'm talking about a synodal Church, because a synodal Church is a Church where all the baptised feel engaged. They share the same faith, they also share the same responsibility to help this encounter with Jesus.



Cardinal Grech with Pope Francis

A second reason I might add is that the Holy Father would like us to reflect upon synodality for the Church to retrieve itself. Because when we are talking about synodality, we are talking about the Church. Synodality is not an added element to the Church; it is the Church. In fact, the Holy Father says that the Church either is synodal or it is not Church at all. And when we say Church, again I repeat, we mean the people of God. This is the teaching of Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, Chapter 2, where all the baptised are included. It's a pity that at times there are those who say the 'people of God', only means the laity. We are all people of God. Obviously, we have different charisms, different ministries, but this is for a particular purpose, so that we can fulfill the commandment that Jesus gave us to proclaim the Gospel to the world. The more we become Church, the more we become missionary.

Q: What might be some of the fruits that you see from the additional Continental Stage of the Synod?

This second phase is new but, after all, this particular Synod is new because it is

the first time the consultation phase is part of the Synod. In the past it used to be in preparation for the Synod. But this time the Synod was inaugurated in Rome and in every Diocese to send a message that every particular Church is engaged in the Synod because the Universal Church is, and starts from, particular Churches. This new second phase was envisaged in the Constitution, *Episcopalis Communio*, which stated that continental meetings could be held, so this time we have put it into practice with seven continental meetings. This new stage gives local Churches the opportunity to learn and appreciate what's going on in other continents. The Working Document for the Continental Stage brings together the various views from the Universal Church so now every particular Church, and every continental Church has the possibility to listen to what other Churches are saying. We can really learn from one another when we listen to one another. At the continental level, we are practising the principle of circularity, by that I mean that one particular Church knows what another particular Church is going through. One



nation knows what another nation is going through. This helps us more to be one Church, with our differences, but in communion with our diversity. So I hope that this new experience, this Continental Stage, which is another listening phase, will help us not only to go more in depth into the themes presented in the working document, but will enrich each particular Church with this variety of ecclesial experiences.

If you noticed, we purposefully made a choice to only insert quotes from the different Churches in the Working Document. There are no quotes from the Magisterium because we are still in the listening phase and we are listening to what's going on to what those in consecrated life are saying and so on. This gives us the opportunity to witness the spiritual richness that really embellishes the Church. While there are some difficulties present, we should be aware of them and journey together with them, sustaining one another. We might not have an answer; that's okay. But if we walk together and be open to the Holy Spirit, then we might also find the desired answers.

Q: Do you think that the extended time of the Synod might resolve some of the tensions that have emerged?

I think that there are two types of tensions. There are the tensions that emerged because of the Synod, but there are also tensions, which were already present prior to the inauguration of the synodal process. This Synod brought these tensions to the surface, to the fore, to our attention. There were already tensions within the people of God and this is something positive because a tent cannot stand if the ropes are not tense. The tensions can help us to stay awake and be vigilant; to be open to the Spirit in a prayerful attitude; to invoke the Spirit



Mario Grech with Natalie Becquart and Luis Marín (Synod Leadership Team)

to enlighten His Church and to find the way to incarnate the Gospel today. The reality today is different from yesterday, so it is a must that we also try to find an answer to the queries that contemporary people are bringing to the fore. There are tensions but I'm not really worried about this; this is natural. The Synod is a new experience and we are in a learning process. Even for me it's a learning curve as well. We are all learning, but we have one particular motive. We love the Church, we love Jesus Christ; we are faithful to the Church, faithful to Jesus.

It's our mission to help the Church enlarge, to understand better the Word of God, which is not subject to change. The way we understand can be improved. We can understand the Gospel in the light of Tradition and in the light of the Magisterium. So, those who are afraid that the Synod will bring about drastic doctrinal changes, are not correct. They should not be afraid of this. First of all, because the nature of the Synod is not doctrinal. It is a pastoral experience. Obviously, if questions are raised, I think it's our duty to give an answer, but to give an answer does not mean that we have to invent a new answer. Perhaps we have to explain in a better way, in a language that is understood today.

In terms of the spiritual wealth that the Church has been entrusted with, neither the Gospel nor doctrine belongs to us individually or privately. It is the heritage that we received, and we are

duty bound to progress, communicating and helping in the evolution of its understanding. I'm glad to say that even since October 2021 there are quite a few who are admitting that at first they were a bit hesitant; that they had their doubts, but now they're really learning about the benefits of synodality. If I can share with you an experience. I was in India, and I met the Episcopal Conference there. One bishop told me that at first he was a bit hesitant. He was not sure where this journey was going to lead. But when he participated in this listening experience and accompanied the people of God, he said, 'I am so happy now. I feel that I found something new about the Church.' I think this should be the experience we all must share because synodality opens a new window on the Church and on the world as well.

Q: Considering the themes that are coming from the Working Document, how do you see the fuller participation of the people of God, especially women, emerging from this process?

Well, as I said earlier, the aim of synodality is to make space for all, all the baptised. We should not be afraid to extend and make space for other people of good will. So, in the Church there is room for all. It's not something by concession that somebody is creating the space for somebody else. The Church is this open space, where all people of good will can find their place.

First of all, I am grateful to a good number of women in my life, because I am here! I have been supported since a young age by women. First of all my mother. Then my catechists, my teachers, my collaborators as a parish priest and as a Bishop. I always had good collaboration from women. We have to acknowledge this. I agree that we should create or make more space for the participation of women. This would be an enrichment for the people of God, not only for women, but for all people. Even, allow me to say, for those whom we judge as sinners, because we are good at judging others. We try to exclude people because we think that they should be excluded. But perhaps they are excluded in our eyes, but not in the eyes of God. The Holy Father says that even sinners have something to contribute. I'm using the word sinners in a blunt way here, aiming to emphasise that nobody is to be excluded from this journey. All have something to contribute for the good of the Church and for the good of humanity.

Q: How can we surf the wave of the Universal Synod for the benefit of our Synodal Pathway here in Ireland, so that we don't create 'consultation fatigue' amongst the people of God?

I think it should not be difficult because it's the same journey and one experience enriches the other. The universal journey is inviting us to reflect about synodality and how we can adapt a synodal style for the Church. Obviously, this will help your experience. This will enrich your synodal process, after all, we have the same Gospel; we are in the same Church. What is being observed or analysed on a wide range can also be the focus of a smaller range, which is the Church in your country.

I believe that the universal synodal process is a blessing. You are in an advantageous position because you have all this wealth, this ecclesial wealth, coming from all the Church at the right moment when you are going through this synodal process. Who am I to suggest, but if I may suggest, you could proceed at a slower pace. To wait for the conclusion of the universal synodal process, which might help you to work in a better way on your own synodal pathway in Ireland.

You used the word fatigue, but is it the correct word? I am underlining this because various reports received from the first phase remarked that people were happy, full of joy, because they were being listened to. Synodality empowers

the People of God. It is not a reason to render them fatigued. It empowers them – the People of God, and the People of God are surprised, but they are also happy to hear that Church believes that the Holy Spirit also communicates through them. It is the duty of the pastors to discern, listening to all the voices, to discern the true voice of the Holy Spirit, but we can't listen to the Holy Spirit if we don't listen to the People of God. I repeat, this should be a motive of joy to all.

Q: What is the most joy-filled aspect of your ministry with the Synod?

I am thankful to the Lord. I was happy in my diocese but I am also happy here because this ministry gives me the opportunity to share this moment of grace with other people, just like you right now. Synodality itself is a source of joy, and a source of hope to many. For me, this is something that I am grateful for. I'm glad that, notwithstanding my limitations, the Lord has called me to be at the service of the Church in this particular moment.

Q: Is there anything you would specifically invite people to pray for with the Synod?

I invite the people to continue to pray, because synodality is a spiritual experience. Considering that the protagonist of the synodal journey is the Holy Spirit, please pray for us. So that we

will have an open heart, a docile heart to listen to the Spirit.

Q: How do you see the Church in 10 years' time?

A more Christ-like church so that whoever meets us can say that he or she is meeting Jesus. That would be our mission.

Julieann Moran's role includes the promotion of synodality here in Ireland, supporting Ireland's continued contribution to the Universal Synod, and to preparing directly at local, regional and national level for the holding of a Synod or series of synodal assemblies in Ireland within the next four years.



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