

In October 2021, Pope Francis announced a Universal Synod on the theme of synodality. Its official title is ‘For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission.’ Following two years of preparation, listening and dialogue at diocesan, continental and universal level, more than 360 people gathered in Rome to participate in the first of two synodal assemblies planned for this Synod. This first session took place from 4 - 29 October. The second session is scheduled for October 2024. For the first time in the history of the Synod of Bishops, 70 non-bishop members also participated in the synodal assembly as voting members.

Bishop Brendan Leahy from the Diocese of Limerick and Bishop Alan McGuckian from the Diocese of Raphoe were the two bishop nominees of the Irish Catholic Bishops’ Conference who attended the first session. Here follows their report of their experience.

The Experience

The Synodal Assembly was a deeply intense experience, spiritually, culturally and theologically. Our first word in response is “thanks” – to God for this grace and to all who contributed so generously over the past two years to the Synodal pathway in parishes and religious congregations, dioceses, movements and organisations. We offer a special word of “thanks” to the many people who accompanied the XVI Synodal Assembly with prayer. There was much prayer during the XVI Synodal Assembly. We started with an ecumenical prayer service and then three days of a retreat with Father Timothy Radcliffe OP and Mother Maria Angelini OSB. Apart from the daily prayers during the Synod, we had special moments of prayer for refugees and migrants and for peace. We visited the catacombs in a pilgrimage of prayer. Throughout our deliberations in the Synod hall, there were regular periods of silence to take on board what was being said by others and to pray.

The format for this Synodal Assembly was completely different to previous synods, with a “Conversations in the Spirit” methodology and round-table group work. The Pope was present for many of the General Congregations (plenary sessions) but intervened very briefly just a few times. With the four-minute limit for each speaker throughout the whole Synod, no one speaker or perspective dominated. Each group prepared short two-page summaries of their convergences/ divergences/ questions on each topic.

The Eastern churches in communion with Rome were very present and the presence of fraternal delegates of other churches was significant. These fraternal delegates participated fully in the group work and could also address the whole assembly. A number of testimonies of Synodal experiences from around the world were formally on the programme (invited by the General Synod organisers). One very up-beat and passionate testimony was on an experience of digital missionaries in South America.

Take-Aways

The biggest outcome from the Synodal Assembly is probably the emphasis on the “Conversations in the Spirit”. The four weeks were an intense learning by doing with the constant repetition of the method. The desire emerged that this method, perhaps tweaked according to context, will spread now throughout the Church.

The way the modules or sections of the Assembly worked was that we were seated in groups of 11 with a facilitator for each group. Each group had a specific topic that it discussed over a period of approximately three days and then the members moved on to another group and another topic. After a period of prayer to begin each session, each person was given four minutes to put forward their perspective on the topic, without interruptions from others. This was followed by a period of silence and prayer. In a second round, each of us got four minutes to say what had struck us listening to the others – what had resonated positively for us and what had prompted resistance in us. Again a period of silence. A third round saw us exploring together what it was we felt God was saying to us on that topic so that we could present our finding to the whole assembly. That meant we had to note where we had convergences in our thought and where there were divergences and questions for further investigation. Where there was disagreement this was acknowledged honestly. Having listened for a day and a half to the feedback from all the other groups and the inputs from individuals who spoke to the whole assembly, we again spent a half-day as a group reflecting on our topic with a view to summarising our thoughts in a two-page summary that was submitted to the secretariat of the Synod whose task it then was to draw all these summaries together into a final synthesis. The centrality of baptism featured large in conversations. It is the sacrament that unites us and in which we are all equal. Attention to the poor in all dimensions was clear.

The topic of women and the Church is clearly an issue of universal concern, even if with different nuances – and with disagreement on the question of women and Holy Orders – and clearly requires action. There was a recognition that there are already many synodal structures in the Church but they need to be implemented fully at every level. The need for formation in synodality at all levels was a constant theme throughout the four weeks. Improved formation for clergy was called for often. There was a call for greater theological and canonical research on topics between now and next October in areas such as women and decision-making/taking, the issue of diaconate, women and diaconate, the relationship of jurisdiction and sacrament, the need for revisions in canon law, and attention to what were called controversial questions.

Actions emerging from the Final Synthesis

At times there was a sense among some participants that the Synod was biting off more than it could chew. The final Synthesis reflects the many, many topics touched upon. It is a little miracle how the teams of writers managed to pull it all together. Sister Patricia Murray, an Irish Loreto Sister, was nominated by the Pope as a member of the editing commission for the Final Synthesis. The Final Synthesis document provides a rich theological grounding for synodality and the topics named are well presented. There are many nuggets of wisdom, insight and perspective contained in the text. It would be well worth taking even just a section or chapter of this document and studying it together.

There are elements in the proposals that do not need a year before being implemented. The “Conversations in the Spirit” methodology could be applied anywhere. The Synthesis calls for the training of facilitators (and that fits in well with the proposal of the Irish Synodal pathway to offer training for those facilitating synodal engagement). Women’s involvement in decision-making is an area for exploration and action. There’s also a point made in the Synthesis document that in parish/local synodal structures, when it comes to pastoral councils, it might not just be the local Mass-going population that are to be involved, but others with various competencies could be invited to become members of such councils. There was a call for greater attention to be given to the celebration of the liturgy as a privileged place of synodality. It was proposed that there be established councils and advisory bodies at which representatives of lay associations and ecclesial movements and new communities can meet.

There was a call for shared discernment on controversial doctrinal, pastoral and ethical issues to be developed, in the light of the Word of God, Church teaching, theological reflection and an appreciation of the synodal experience. The world of digital mission calls for action.

Questions

Many questions were opened up at the Synod and require further examination. It was said that the experience of the permanent diaconate needs to be evaluated. This would also impact on the question of women and diaconate. The topic of how jurisdiction and sacrament are linked needs to be explored further. This would impact on the issue of women and decision making/taking in the Church. The topic of how collegiality and synodality relate was keenly felt by some. Is there a danger that the teaching authority of the bishops both individually and as a College could be undermined? The theme of “listening” came up often with the proposal that there be a ministry of listening in the Church. And a range of controversial questions were named and discussed.

Conclusion

The XVI Synodal Assembly was a positive experience. It was marked by a prayerful and calm atmosphere, even if divergent viewpoints were expressed. The 365 members represented a great variety of cultural backgrounds and convictions. The presence of the 54 women, fully members of the Synodal Assembly with voting rights, was a significant milestone in the development of the Synod of Bishops since instituted after the Second Vatican Council. The young people present contributed in a spirit of freedom and with a passion for the Church. What emerged particularly was the realisation that synodality is not just about an “event” that happens now and then. Synodality is about a “process”, a way of being Church, a style of interacting together in discerning what the Spirit is saying to the Church.

It is important to remember, of course, that the October gathering was just the first phase of a two-part Synodal Assembly. The second part will take place in October 2024. In the coming weeks, the General Secretariat of the Synod in Rome will offer guidelines on how best to prepare during the coming months for part two. It will be important for us to keep in mind the three central themes that guided our reflection at the synodal assembly: communion, participation and mission.