

## POPE FRANCIS, TEN YEARS ON: EVANGELISATION, SYNODALITY, RENEWAL

As we mark ten years of Francis as Pope, we can confidently say that Evangelisation is the primary purpose of this Papacy. Synodality, as a new way of being and working as Church, is the road towards renewing this evangelising Church.<sup>i</sup> With the publication of *Evangelii Gaudium* at the beginning of his ministry, Pope Francis expressed clearly his hope:

Let us recover and deepen our enthusiasm, that delightful and comforting joy of evangelising, even when it is in tears that we must sow... And may the world of our time, which is searching, sometimes with anguish, sometimes with hope, be enabled to receive the good news not from evangelisers who are dejected, discouraged, impatient or anxious, but from ministers of the Gospel whose lives glow with fervour, who have first received the joy of Christ.<sup>ii</sup>

Francis uses similar words to describe both evangelisation and synodality – accompaniment, walking together, encounter, dialogue, conversion, transformation. Together, they work towards an ecclesial renewal in "a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything."<sup>iii</sup> In what follows, I hope to reflect more fully on this relationship between evangelisation, synodality, and renewal

Evangelisation is the way to renewal and renewal is for the sake of evangelisation. By being outward-facing, by moving from the centre to the peripheries, the Church cannot but be renewed. In this light, synodality cannot be seen simply as a new model or institutional way of being church. Rather, as one of her essential characteristics, it becomes a constituent and constitutive dimension of the Church. Rafael Luciani notes:

It is therefore important to recognise that synodality, as a constitutive dimension, is more than a synod, and it is also more than a mere method: it is a principle, and it is a hermeneutics of reconfigured relationships and communicative dynamics among all ecclesial subjects that sets in motion an integral, organic transformation of the whole church.<sup>iv</sup>

He calls this *ecclesiogenesis*, an on-going state of conversion and reform which creates the possibility to view all ecclesial structures, subjects, relationships, and modes of operating within the hermeneutic of the People of God.<sup>v</sup> This picks up nicely the eschatological nature of the Church as a people *in via*, journeying together, ready and able to discard culturally determined forms and structures in order to more fully express the mind of Christ.<sup>vi</sup> For Pope Francis, this new way of being and working as Church must be rooted in its evangelizing nature so that renewal must have mission as its goal.<sup>vii</sup> This going out to the

peripheries aims to save the Church from damaging introspection, self-referential thinking, and self-serving attempts to protect the institution at all costs. Synodality brings Christ and the Church to the world.

By focusing on the image of the Church as People of God, Francis is emphasising the role of all the baptised as *Christifideles* in the evangelising mission of the Church. He is consolidating the teaching of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Vatican Council to emphasise the unity, participation, and communion of all in responding to the Great Commission of the Lord (Matthew 28.16-20).<sup>viii</sup> It is because of their baptism that all the faithful become missionary disciples and it is only *within* the People of God that the hierarchy, as *Christifideles* themselves, can exercise their ministry and be clear about their identity. Bearing the image of the Trinity in its mutual giving and receiving, the People of God has the Logos, the Word, at its heart and the Spirit as its prime mover. This means that all the faithful together bring this Word, heard and responded to, incarnate in their lives, to the teachings of the Church.<sup>ix</sup> A relational anthropology is pre-supposed.<sup>x</sup> To put it another way, they can act as subjects, as people with agency, rather than objects who passively receive. Indeed, it is incumbent upon the entire people of God to do this. Here we see a deeper theology of baptism emerging.

In this synodal way of being church, the distinction between *ecclesia docens* (the teaching Church, the hierarchy) and *ecclesia discens* (the learning church, the laity) becomes attenuated. It is no longer adequate to say that the laity simply have to learn and understand better the teaching of the bishops. There must be an on-going reciprocity and mutuality which regulates the understanding of the faith and comes from a single common effort on the part of the bishops and the laity to discern the *sensus fidei totius fidelium*.<sup>xi</sup> All the faithful together through baptism are charged with this task of discerning and deciding how to carry out the Church's evangelising mission. Viewed in this light, the laity's role in the Church can no longer be seen as delegated or secondary but must be seen as deriving directly from Christ through baptism and strengthened and nourished through the other Sacraments.<sup>xii</sup>

A synodal Church, then, must be viewed firstly in terms of baptism rather than hierarchy or sacramental ordination. It is no accident that that the Council uses the term *Christifideles* to describe all the baptised and not just the lay faithful. Co-responsibility is rooted in Baptism and belongs to the entire People of God.<sup>xiii</sup> Gathered together in the Eucharist, confirmed by the Holy Spirit, a synodal Church becomes ever-more a liturgical and doxological presence in our world. When Pope Francis talks of “the whole over the parts” and “from the periphery

to the centre,”<sup>xiv</sup> he emphasises the equality of all through Baptism and the totality of the People of God in proper order – the People of God first, then the bishops, and finally the Pope. Viewed in this light, the common priesthood of all is prior to and the prerequisite for the ministerial priesthood. The ordained still belong to this common priesthood within which and for which they serve their ministry, and to which they remain subordinated.<sup>xv</sup> Synodality serves to integrate the ordained leadership of the Church into the totality of the People of God as *Christifideles*. The primacy of hierarchical communion is displaced by communion of all the faithful.<sup>xvi</sup>

Evangelisation through synodality places the Church firmly in history and concrete experience. Neither is an exercise in abstract or theoretical ideas: “Belief is transmitted in usage and habit before it is formulated in definitions.”<sup>xvii</sup> When Francis states that “realities are more important than ideas,” he points to the Christocentric nature of what he proposes:

The primary reason for evangelizing is the love of Jesus which we have received, the experience of salvation which urges us to ever greater love of him. What kind of love would not feel the need to speak of the beloved, to point him out, to make him known?”<sup>xviii</sup>

Mirroring the Incarnation, the missionary Church enters the suffering and anguish, the joys and hopes of the world. Evangelisation, then, is not first and foremost the teaching of a body of doctrine but rather a personal, concrete witness to the presence of Christ in the believer. It takes place in encounter, in a relational context through which the presence of Christ is experienced in mercy, accompaniment, and listening. Mutual transformation emerges in the missionary experience. It is important to understand that this model of evangelisation is deeply ecclesial. It allows the believer and the non-believer alike already to experience the community life of the Church both at the universal and local level.<sup>xix</sup> It is in this experience of encounter and walking with individuals that the Church undergoes conversion (*metanoia*) and self-emptying (*kenosis*) after the pattern of the Paschal Mystery. Indeed, when the Church becomes the environment in which the life of all is nourished in mutual selfless love, it grows in doctrinal wisdom and understanding and becomes ever-more an image of the Trinity in its communion, participation, and mission. A synodal church is not only the driver of this but a more synodal church also is born out of this.<sup>xx</sup>

Through evangelisation and synodality the Catholic Tradition is “handed down” both to the Church and the world. From what has been said, it becomes clear that Tradition is not something static and fixed, a body of truths or inherited

beliefs, or a “deposit of faith” which is articulated immutably in a formula of words. When the 2<sup>nd</sup> Vatican Council stated that both Scripture and Tradition flow from the same divine wellspring, it rooted both in the dynamic life of the Trinity in whose life all the baptised share.<sup>xxi</sup> The proclamation and handing on of the faith is an announcing of the present action of the Spirit in our Church and world which brings the communion, participation, and mission of the Trinity into our contemporary situation and experience. This is entrusted to the entire body of believers, according to the charisms which each has received.

After 10 years of Francis’ ministry, we are still only in the foothills of this journey towards a renewed evangelising and synodal church. Serious theological work has been published over this decade, as the bibliography of Jos Moons shows.<sup>xxii</sup> This will only intensify. At the level of the local Church, the picture is mixed – some dioceses have committed fully, others less so. Here in Scotland, Archbishop William Nolan of Glasgow has created a fund of £1,000,000 for evangelisation and invited the newly established deanery councils, consisting of both priests and laity, to apply for funding for projects which they propose. There is an urgent need for formation of all the faithful, (bishops, clergy, laity), for this new way of being Church. As we move forward, we can expect much to be offered to supply this formation.

Evangelisation, synodality, and renewal are all intimately related one to the others. At their heart is the theological gift of hope which creates an openness to the future being created by the Holy Spirit, and prevents a misplaced nostalgia which would “mummify” the Church through “indietroismo” (going backwards), to use Francis’ startling imagery. The draft Working Document for the Synod on Synodality has now been approved and will be published in early June in preparation for the Synod in October. Then a clearer picture of where the church is at will appear. We will become aware of the fears, difficulties, and challenges which present themselves but hopefully more aware of the possibilities and opportunities awaiting the People of God. The last word to Pope Francis:

“If something should rightly disturb us and trouble our consciences, it is the fact that so many of our brothers and sisters are living without the strength, light and consolation born of friendship with Jesus Christ, without a community of faith to support them, without meaning and a goal in life. More than by fear of going astray, my hope is that we will be moved by the fear of remaining shut up within structures which give us a false sense of security, within rules which make us harsh judges, within habits which make us feel safe, while at our door

people are starving and Jesus does not tire of saying to us: “Give them something to eat” (Mk 6:37)”<sup>xxiii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> “Synodality is a way of realising the gifts of the whole body of Christ through the service of mission, but it is also a way of healing the wounds of the Church itself. The more completely the Church can live a synodal life, the more it can be a sign to all peoples of the graced ‘fraternity’ or solidarity that is the ultimate reality of humanity, which includes care for ‘our common home.’” James Hanvey, “The Journey of Synodality,” *Thinking Faith*, (July, 2021).

<sup>ii</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium*, 10. The allusion to *Gaudium et Spes* is clear.

<sup>iii</sup> *EG*, 25.

<sup>iv</sup> *Synodality. A New Way of Proceeding in the Church* (New York, Paulist Press 2022) 74.

<sup>v</sup> This is a term he borrows from Leonardo Boff who considers that the church is born out of the faith of the people. *Church, Charism, and Power* (London, SCM Press 1985) 131.

<sup>vi</sup> “This dynamic vision of synodality presents the Church in its historical dimension in a state of permanent birth, in an on-going process of reform. It lets us perceive that the identity of the Church is a dynamic identity, not a static one; it is a relational identity of communion-mission rooted in the Trinitarian mystery and the Eucharistic mystery.” Nathalie Becquart, “Synodality: Towards a Renewal of Ministry,” in *The Synodal Pathway. When Rhetoric meets Reality*, ed. Eamonn Conway, Eugene Duffy, Mary McDaid (Dublin: Columba Books, 2022), 72.

<sup>vii</sup> *EG*, 27. “Synodality, in Francis’ regenerative conception, allows for the full ecclesiological consequences of the Church as the people of God, and is inextricably bound up with a call for a missionary, centrifugal Church, *ex natura ad extra*, in which ordinary believers take responsibility for evangelising our world as missionary disciples.” Austen Ivereigh, “Pope Francis’ Vision of a Synodal Church: The Spirit in the Assembly,” in *The Synodal Pathway*, 33.

<sup>viii</sup> “One important task for us all if we are to embrace co-responsibility is to change our mindset away from a model of a top-down teaching church. At the risk of oversimplifying, if we look back to the First Vatican Council, we see that it reinforced the role of the pope, seen at the top of a pyramidal church with supreme power. With Vatican II, the church embraced the notion that the pope is not alone but part of a college of bishops, and emphasized the notion of collegiality. Perhaps now with synodality, based on the recognition that the Holy Spirit is working in all the baptized, we are being called through the synod to embrace a further vision where everyone in the church—regardless of status, regardless of vocation—has much to offer the rest of us.” Nathalie Becquart, “Like Vatican II, the synod is a dynamic example of the church in history,” *America Magazine* (March, 2023).

<sup>ix</sup> “The entire body of the faithful, anointed as they are by the Holy One, cannot err in matters of belief. They manifest this special property by means of the whole peoples’ supernatural discernment in matters of faith when “from the Bishops down to the last of the lay faithful” they show universal agreement in matters of faith and morals.” *LG* 12. “[The church] transcends itself in a posture of openness and receptivity to God’s self-disclosure ... The whole Christian faithful are given a supernatural instinct for the faith (*sensus fidei*) that offers them an active role in the life of a “listening” church (*LG* 12). According to the council, the teaching of the magisterium is less a *determinatio fidei*, an independent determination of the faith of the church, than a *testificatio fidei*, an authoritative witness to that which the bishops have heard.” Richard R. Gaillardetz, “The Synodal Shape of Church Ministry and Order,” *Concilium* (2021/2): 99.

<sup>x</sup> Rowan Williams talks of “the Christian community that held together the freedom of the person and the irreducibly communal and cooperative nature of human personhood.” *Looking East in Winter. Contemporary Thought and the Eastern Christian Tradition* (London, Bloomsbury Continuum 2021) 168.

<sup>xi</sup> “Singularis antistitum et fidelium conspiratio,” *Dei Verbum* 10. “The Spirit has not only been given to the bishops – hence collegiality – but to all the faithful. Here, the old distinction between a hierarchical teaching church and a lay learning church (*ecclesia docens, ecclesia discens*) has been surpassed. Once again, that does

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not mean the hierarchy's role is abolished, but recontextualized: the ordained ministers can only discern the Spirit if they have first contemplated the Spirit's (possible) work in the people as a whole." Jos Moons, "Synodality, The Holy Spirit, and Discernment of Spirits," in *The Synodal Pathway*, , 83.

<sup>xii</sup> The sense of faith possessed by all the faithful. *Apostolicam Actuositatem* 4, 5, 10.

<sup>xiii</sup> "The category of the people of God, as the totality of the faithful in mutual reciprocity, becomes a hermeneutical principle; its ontological normativity defines the roles and functions of each *Christifidelis* in a constitutive, processual manner." Luciani, Synodality, 53. "What is given or restored or brought to full maturity in Christ ... is the capacity for *knowledge in communion*." Rowan Williams, *Looking East in Winter. Contemporary Thought and the Eastern Christian Tradition* (London, Bloomsbury Continuum 2021) 126.

<sup>xiv</sup> *EG*, 235-237

<sup>xv</sup> See, *Presbyterorum Ordinis* 2, 8. LG 25-29.

<sup>xvi</sup> "A correct exercise of synodality must contribute to a better articulation of the ministry of the personal and collegial exercise of apostolic authority with the synodal exercise of discernment on the part of the community." International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/...](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/...) 69.

<sup>xvii</sup> Williams, *Looking East*, 179

<sup>xviii</sup> *EG*, 264

<sup>xix</sup> "The action of each particular agent within the community, whenever it is transformed by God's grace, is the action of the whole community, because in this context 'the building -up of each person builds up all, and the life of all animates each other.'" Williams, *Looking East*, 164

<sup>xx</sup> "Synodality asks us to enter into something more than reform or development. It asks us to seek the grace and courage to make the Church an authentic community of love, with an openness to that which is other, a willingness to serve rather than rule, and a desire to follow Christ. We adhere to his truth not only for our own salvation but as the hope of all women and men, especially those forgotten, oppressed and exploited, those 'excluded from the banquet of life.' Synodality asks us to fall in love with the Church again and to love her as Christ does." Hanvey, "The Journey of Synodality."

<sup>xxi</sup> *Dei Verbum*, 9.

<sup>xxii</sup> *Synodality and the Roman-Catholic Church. An Academic Bibliography 2013-2022* (Leuven, KU 2023)

<sup>xxiii</sup> *EG*, 49.