

Some Catholics fear that the synodal process will lead to change in the Church; some fear that the synodal process will leave everything in the Church just the same. But the fundamental purpose of the synod is not to change the Church. It is to prepare the Church to save the world / By JENNY SINCLAIR

A synod for the world

JUST UNDER two years ago, Pope Francis announced that the next General Synod – the gathering of bishops from around the world in Rome that normally takes place every two years – would focus on synodality itself. The themes would be communion, participation and mission, and for the first time in the history of the Church it would invite all 1.37 billion Catholics to take part in a two-year process of listening and discernment.

A legacy of the Second Vatican Council, the aim of this “journeying together” – the literal meaning of “synodality” – is to bring Catholics closer to the mission of Jesus. In this “way of being Church”, the whole People of God comes closer together on the journey of bringing alive the Kingdom of God on Earth. It has been described as the largest and most ambitious listening exercise in the history of humanity.

Some Catholics, including some who have written to *The Tablet*, have responded more in fear than in hope: fear of change, or fear of no change. Others are trying to use the process to push a particular agenda; some see it as a cynical exercise in ecclesial politics; some dismiss it as a colossal waste of time. Can Catholics overcome this confusion and rise to the opportunity? I suggest that by reading the political and cultural signs of the times we can understand the fundamental purpose of this Synod. It is nothing less than God’s way of preparing the Church to save the world.

I have been a Catholic for over half my life, and my vocation has drawn me into listening and learning across the Christian traditions. My typical week includes conversations with friends from Pentecostal, Evangelical, Free Church, Catholic, Anglican, prophetic, charismatic and church planting backgrounds as well as the Religious orders. I cherish my Jewish friends for their unique witness, and I learn from my non-religious friends and contacts of all faiths and none, in civil society, business and politics. I listen across the political spectrum and across class and different cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

This listening and learning does not dilute my tradition. On the contrary, it reveals a clearer sense of the calling of the Church, and the opportunities that the Synod presents. My personal journey has taught me that Catholic social thought (CST) can help us read the signs of the times. Inspired by the Gospel and informed by the learned experience of the Church in every nation over a hundred and thirty years, it is rooted in centuries of tradition and natural law. It helps us understand how political and philosophical

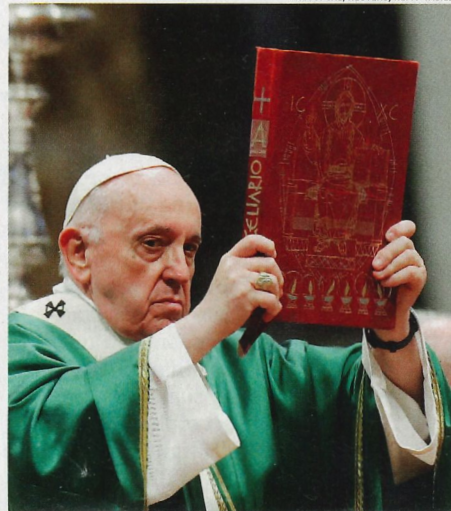


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Pope Francis raises the Book of the Gospels at Mass in October to open the process that will lead up to the 2023 Synod of Bishops

ideas and policies affect the human person, and to recognise when social systems and cultural values are dehumanising. CST helps us to be politically literate in alignment with our faith, to avoid mission-drift and the corrosive influence of modernism and post-modernism. It is sometimes called the theology of the Holy Spirit in practice. It can help us discern our way through the Synod process.

SEVEN YEARS ago Pope Francis said, “We are living not through an era of change, but a change of era.” He was not alone in recognising an unravelling, marked by a breakdown in trust, polarisation, social fragmentation and symptoms of distress, including rises in loneliness, addiction, self-harm, depression and nihilism. Most of these signs of dark times have accelerated since the start of the pandemic but they were not caused by it: they are part of a decades-long trend. A radical individualism and hyper-liberalism, on the left and the right, has driven the commodification of human beings and an over-reliance on technocratic solutions to human problems. This era has deeper roots still, beginning with the Enlightenment, which despite its many benefits, resulted in a turning away from God. It led to a profound loss of the sense of the transcendent nature of the human person. The dire consequences of this loss were inevitable.

Whether it is human trafficking or zero hours contracts, the medicalisation of sadness or dating apps, the elevation of academic qualifications over vocational work or the promotion of mobility over community – the

combination of the dominance of capital and the technocratic paradigm has had catastrophic effects on our institutional and social relationships and our sense of belonging. The family, community and our sense of place have all been undermined, there is a crisis of purpose and alienation, particularly among the young. The social and economic damage takes visible form in the degradation and abandonment of whole communities.

THIS ERA has affected the churches too. Many have become inward looking, falling out of relationship with people, becoming marginalised; some have been infected by secular modern and post-modern philosophies or distracted by the culture wars. Many churches do not know who they are and no longer understand their civic vocation. Clerical sexual abuse scandals and the pandemic have accelerated this trajectory of decline.

We, the Church, the people of God, have a unique vocation to counter these dehumanising trends, but we are not well prepared. We are held back, by a lack of awareness of what’s going on, by exhaustion from managerial solutions such as parish reorganisations or unrealistic financial projections, and, crucially, by flawed and inadequate formation as Christian disciples.

And yet God *is* at work; the profound changes under way are God’s way of purifying and renewing the Church to be fit for the task ahead. We are in a time of deep spiritual malaise, but this era, which has been so hostile to humanity, is unravelling. We are on the cusp of change and the Church needs to be ready to respond. All my conversations and encounters tell me that our country needs a Church which is a gateway to the Holy Spirit, and which understands and takes its place in society.

IT IS VITAL that we understand what the Synod that is now underway is about – and what it is not about. The Synod is not about saving the Church. It is about saving the world. If we don’t understand that this is its purpose, then it will become inward-looking, and we will fail the world. Pope Francis emphasises that the Synod involves “discernment of the times in which we are living, in solidarity with the struggles and aspirations of all humanity” in order to deliver the Church’s mission in a de-sacralised world. Quoting from the Vatican Council document *Lumen Gentium*, he described its task as “proclaiming and establishing among all peoples the Kingdom of Christ and of God”.

In journeying together we invite the Holy

Spirit to work through us, the people of God, in everyday life, at all levels and across all societies. For this reason Francis has written that the Synod “is not a parliament or an opinion poll” – it should not be confused with the General Synod of the Church of England. Rather, in our hearts, in every diocese in every nation, this “walking together” is about nothing less than revitalising our vocation. Each of us is called to a distinctively Christian role, according to our gifts and abilities, in the social and spiritual renewal of our country.

CST shows us that there are three kinds of power: money power, state power and relational power, the power that human beings build together. The churches must help to generate relational power, in order to resist the dehumanising tendencies of money and state power. Relational power should be at the heart of the new formation that the Church needs. Only the renewal of local relationships can lead to the emergence of a new politics of grace. And only that will bring forth a new settlement for the common good.

The individualism of the modern world is an obstacle to grace. Too many Christians are stuck in a consumerist model: go to church, get something, and go home again. All too often, Christian life lacks the fellowship of mutual love and support. One woman told me she had been struggling with terrible debt for two years. She had gone to Mass every week but hadn't told a soul about her troubles. Why didn't that parish have a culture where she was known, where she could be real, loved and supported?

TO DEVELOP relational power, we need to become a relational Church. That requires reframing our conception of “church” as more than a local institution, more than a place of worship. It is to conceive of church as a community of faithful people committed to a place, outward-facing to the world, living in loving friendship with others in the neighbourhood, and with a commitment to building local relationships – personal and institutional. The need for these relationships is especially great in places that have been abandoned: politically, economically and spiritually.

To be in relationship with our neighbours, we must be at home together. But the declining Church has fallen out of relationship with large parts of the population. In particular, too much of the Church in Britain, like too much of our politics, has suffered from middle class dominance. When we welcome diversity, we must include class. Otherwise we will draw the wrong conclusions. When we hear Pope Francis call for a “poor Church for and of the poor”, we must remember that “the poor” means not only the destitute but also working class communities, which include many ethnicities and political opinions. Francis is right to insist that the Church needs to be evangelized by the poor. To be receptive to that evangelizing, middle class Catholics need to be open to building the common good with people from different educational and socio-economic backgrounds, and resist temptations to dominate the space.



The official logo for the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops

If we are to make a positive contribution to the Synod process, we need to treat it as more than an internal Church matter. It must be seen as a new way of being “Church”, to make way for the Kingdom of God, to be the embodiment of love in a desecrated world. The institution of the Church is there to serve the *Missio Dei* – it is not an end in itself. An instrumentalised and agenda-driven Synod will fail. But one approached with humility, grace and an openness to the Holy Spirit could transform the world.

This is not about winning an argument. We must listen to voices across the Church and stop being tribal. Everyone, even those we dislike and fundamentally disagree with, has a part to play. We, the people of God, need to trust each other, whether we are lay, Religious or ordained. There is a need to restore trust not only between laity and bishops, and between laity and clergy, but between clergy too. This is difficult in the context of decline and in the wake of abuse scandals and their coverups, but it is essential if we are to have “an ear [to] listen to what the Spirit is saying” (Revelation 2:29).

We must listen to other Christian traditions with openness and respect. We must learn from those of other faiths and from our non-religious neighbours: God speaks and acts through all kinds of people. If we are anchored in Christ, this will enrich, not weaken our tradition.

The Archdiocese of Liverpool has already completed its initial synodal process. In launching its new pastoral plan, Archbishop Malcolm McMahon declared, “We are not going to be able to return to business as usual and we should put our trust in what God is doing.” He shared his sense that “the only thing we know about the future is that it won't be the same as it is now ... if we walk with each other in the name of the Lord then he is walking with us too: there may be a strange warming of our

hearts as that happens. I really think these are exciting times – I'd go as far as to say that this is the most important day in the life of the Church this millennium. We need to become the Church that God is calling us to be.”

FUNDAMENTAL to becoming “communities of place” are core practices of prayer and discipleship. Many of us may be unfamiliar with what being in relationship with the Holy Spirit is like. The “cell” group can be the key to this. It is often in small, faithful groups that the Spirit transforms, where people journey together, engage deeply with Scripture and talk honestly about what really matters.

If the synodal process is to fulfil its purpose, we must be open to transformation, both personally and collectively. Each parish needs to discern its identity as a people rooted in place, in relationship with its neighbours and with God. To resist the dehumanising tendencies that have so damaged our life together, our posture must always be to assert our transcendent nature as embodied human beings, and to be open to the reality of the Trinity: surrendering to the primacy of God, welcoming the help of the Holy Spirit, accepting the grace of our Lord and saviour Jesus Christ into our lives.

Pope Francis has warned, “If the Spirit is not present, there will be no Synod.” So we should always be attentively listening. We can ask every day, “Lord, what do you want of us?” If we can't walk together on this road, the Church will continue to decline and fail to live out its vocation.

A synodal process at such a time as this is not just an ecclesial exercise. It is a call to renew the world.

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