

What the Synod process is, and what it is not: A reflection by Barbara Davies

SYNODALITY as COMMUNION, PARTICIPATION and MISSION

In what Pope Francis calls the 'SYNODAL PROCESS' – understood as 'walking together' – he invites us first to explore together how we live the fullness of our Christian calling, and then ask how we can do so better. In a recent address to Leaders of French Catholic Action^[1], Pope Francis made clear **what SYNODALITY is**, and **what it is not**. This is what he said:

- The SYNODAL PROCESS is
 "a path of engagement that makes room for the Holy Spirit";
 "a style to be adopted that listens to the Spirit through the word of God, prayer and adoration".
- SYNODALITY is not
 "a majority consensus, like a parliament to guide the universal Church";
 "a plan or a programme to be implemented by the Church".

In a recent book, *Let us Dream*^[2], Pope Francis made this distinction very clear:

- **"What is under discussion at synodal gatherings are not the traditional truths of Christian doctrine.**
- **The Synod is concerned mainly with how that teaching can be lived and applied in the changing contexts of our time".**

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Pope Francis gives the three major themes of the Synodal Process as **COMMUNION, PARTICIPATION** and **MISSION**. These terms are perhaps not clear to us, so let us ask how the Catholic Church understands them.

Of the three terms, the most fundamental is **COMMUNION** because everything in Christianity is a mystery of communion. It is from this that **PARTICIPATION** and **MISSION** flow. What, then, is **COMMUNION**?

There is a striking text in the Gospel according to St John which gives a key to this. It comes at a solemn time towards the end of his earthly life, when Jesus tells his disciples (^[3]):

Abide in me, and I in you.

I am the vine; you are the branches.

Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.

This is more than a mere image. It evokes a reality so profound, a **mystery of communion** so vital, that it cannot easily be defined: Christ is the Vine (he is the 'whole'), we are the branches (the 'part', his members, the Church). This is the source of the Catholic Church's understanding of our relationship with Christ, and with the Father "through him, and with him, and in him... in the unity of the Spirit".

By sharing in the very mystery of communion of Christ and the Church, we are taken up in the more profound mystery of the communion which is the Blessed Trinity: In Christ, the Holy Spirit brings us to a mysterious communion – 'union with' – God the Father. This is why every Eucharistic prayer is addressed not to Christ, but in him through the Spirit to the Father.

To live the Christian life fruitfully, we must abide – remain, dwell, make our home – in Christ. This is the reason our own Bishop, Mark Davies, chose as his episcopal motto: *Nihil sine Christo*: "Nothing without Christ".

This **communion** is, then, something incomparably deeper than a mere imitation of Christ our Lord. It is not the fruit of coming together for meetings. We do not, and indeed cannot, achieve it a by our own efforts.

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How do we come to this new level of existence? This is, quite simply, God's gift to us which we receive through the Church's Sacraments. As Saint Paul writes: "All this is from God!"^[4]

- **Baptism** is what 'grafts us onto' Christ the Vine, thereby making us members of his Body the Church;
- Receiving the living Lord in the **Eucharist** – the 'mystery of communion' and the sacrament of Sacraments – we can abide, remain, in him and learn to live from his life;
- The anointing of **Confirmation** strengthens us in this fruitful living communion, preparing us for the mission which flows from it;
- If we in any way weaken or cut ourselves off from the communion with Christ and the Church, **Confession and Reconciliation** bring us back;
- In the **Sacrament of the Sick**, we are comforted and strengthened in our suffering in union with the Lord and prepared for our final pilgrimage towards eternal communion with God in Heaven;
- The **Sacraments of Orders and Marriage** are called **Sacraments in the Service of Communion**^[5]. Both serve the life (divine and human) of our communion with the Trinity in the Church and the world.

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Saint Paul confirms this understanding of the **communion** at the heart of the Christian life by constantly telling his readers that we are 'in Christ'. He speaks of this relationship 164 times in his letters, so he means it! He repeatedly **affirms** the fundamental truth that we are 'in Christ Jesus', and then he **exhorts** us to live the consequences of that communion in all areas of our life. To take but two examples:

- To the **Colossians**^[6], Saint Paul
- Affirms: "You have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, you also will appear with him in glory."
- Exhorts: "Put to death, therefore, all that is earthly in you...."
- To the **Corinthians**^[7], Saint Paul
- Affirms: "You are the body of Christ and individually members of it."

- Exhorts: “**Earnestly desire the higher gifts**” (of faith, hope, and above all love). This is no passive relationship. All baptised Christians share the dignity and destiny of being in **COMMUNION** with the Trinity and the Church through the Risen Christ who calls us to allow him to act in and through each one, in our own place and our own way:
- Christ brings us all to **PARTICIPATE** in his role as Priest, Prophet, King, either by representing him as Head of the Body (as Ordained Ministers) or as the members of his Body (as Laity and Religious).
- The Risen Lord continues his **MISSION** in and through us –in our own place, according to our specific vocation – by bringing the whole of creation back to the Father in the unity of the Spirit.

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With this in mind, let us meet in our parish or religious community, conscious that **Communion, Participation and Mission** are the starting point. They are the ‘givens’ – God-given to us in the Sacraments.

They are not, as Pope Francis has said repeatedly, fruit of our efforts which we offer to the Church.

Therefore, let our meetings begin with a time of deep prayer, mindful that it is Christ who brings us together and makes us one in him and with each other.

Let us do as Pope Francis asks and spend time before the Blessed Sacrament visible upon the altar, listening to the Holy Spirit in silence and in the word of God which nourishes our communion with the Word.

We will then listen more attentively to each other in truth and in love.

[1] Rome, 13.01.2022. <https://catholicreview.org/pope-synodality/>

[2] Pope Francis, *Let us Dream: The Path to a Better Future* (Simon and Schuster, London, 2020, pp84-85)

[3] John 15:4-5

[4] 2Corinthians 5:18

[5] *Catechism of the Catholic Church* no. 1534

[6] Colossians 3:3-5

[7] 1Corinthians 12:27-31