
SYNODAL LEADERSHIP

Dr Jessie Rogers, Theologian

If the faithful hold on too tightly to how God acted in the past, they might overlook the new thing that God is doing in the present. They need to remember so that they can recognize God's footprints, but then not remember lest expectations based on the past blind them to what God is doing now. It is the same God and the same story but in a different key.

Do not fall into the temptation of thinking that talking about synodality is the same as practicing it. Do not study synodality without experiencing it. To become a synodal church means to *journey together*. It means to *open ourselves to others, to listen and to speak, to reflect and discern*, and to take the next step together. *The road is made by walking.*

This means sowing seeds hopefully, even when we are weeping, and entrusting their growth to God. It means risking ourselves and our future for the sake of the world and its future. It means accepting that change comes about not by force, but by embracing the other through the offer of reconciliation. We need to imbibe Jesus' countercultural way of being in the world.

Like a tree putting out new branches, you need to be open to the future, a future that you cannot predict in advance, but one whose new shoots you can recognize in the present if you pay attention. The God you have come to know is the God who will take the story further. But this God cannot be limited to what you know already.

Sr Nathalie Becquart, XMCJ

To employ synodality, to implement synodal pastoral care, the Church today needs leaders trained in synodality who exercise a new style of leadership - which can be characterised as collaborative leadership - no longer vertical and clerical but more horizontal and cooperative. A servant leadership that translates into a new relationship with power and a new way of exercising authority that is conceived as a service of freedom. It is a certain way of accompanying by placing oneself in the midst of others, to be with them in a co-responsibility that seeks the empowerment and participation of all.

This requires integrating and implementing a sense of authority seen as a generating force for liberating freedom and not as a power of imposition. In the image of Pope Francis, a model of leadership for a synodal Church, pastoral leaders at the service of the synod, called to be both pastors and disciples, are called to embrace these key words: *closeness, availability, trust, mutuality*. Without forgetting the responsibility to maintain the objective of synodality which is to *build a people, a fraternal and missionary community at the service of the common good of society*.

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Pope Francis presents us with a new image of church: that, no matter who we are, we are together in the same boat. The worldwide Synod process came out of that desire to engage with our changing world and with those on the margins to regain a renewed sense of purpose and mission. However, putting this into practice is not so simple. As a Church, we don't necessarily have good ways of listening to voices on the margins and connecting to people's lives. We struggle to have difficult or creative conversations, and to step away from our own agendas. In many ways we have lost the habit of seeking the Holy Spirit, and we are often paralysed by indecision. Pope Francis challenges us to become a listening, engaged church, through becoming more synodal.

Specifically this means:

- Actively responding to our changing world – reading the signs of the times
- Learning how to hold prayerful, truthful and safe conversations which value gracious listening and courageous speaking
- Consciously seeking the Holy Spirit's inspiration
- Being compelled to action by the stories we've heard

Although this sounds complicated, synodality is a way of being community which has been part of the Church since the very beginning (Council of Jerusalem, Acts 15). We have ancient tools of *lectio divina* and spiritual conversation which, when done well, can be transformative. In the past year, as we have grown in confidence in this new way of being, synodality has been used to resolve contentious issues in parishes; to look for creative solutions to diocesan finances; and even to create safe listening spaces in response to clergy sex abuse.

The result of becoming synodal, of truly encountering one another heart-to-heart, is a new sense of purpose. Grounded in the vocation of all the baptised, this purpose brings people together, helps prioritise finances and resources, allows people's gifts to flourish and enables us to take risks for the Kingdom. In Pope Francis' words, we move from being "zombie Christians" to "a caravan of solidarity" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 83, 87) where all are welcome, all loved, all known.

